



2012

A Structuralist Controversy: Althusser and Lacan on Ideology

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

A STRUCTURALIST CONTROVERSY:
ALTHUSSER AND LACAN ON IDEOLOGY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

WON CHOI

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements are due to Éditions du Seuil for permission to reproduce figures from the following two books: Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre V: les formations de l'inconscient*, éd. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998) and Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII: le synthome*, éd. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).

Acknowledgements are due to Norton for permission to reproduce figures from the following two books: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The Complete Edition*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006) and Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

I would like to thank my wonderful professors in the Philosophy Department at Loyola University Chicago. My committee chair, Professor Andrew Cutrofello, pushed me to think more clearly by raising numerous questions during the whole process of writing this dissertation. His vast knowledge of various philosophical traditions was one of the primary sources of my research. Professors David Schweickart and David Ingram gave me chances to develop my ideas about Marx in their classes and became great readers of my dissertation. My special thanks go to Professor Warren Montag from the

Department of English and Comparative Literary Study at Occidental College. He was not only an exceptional outside reader whose expertise on Althusser was a tremendous help, but also became one of my dearest intellectual friends to whom I can always talk about my ideas with comforts.

Loyola University Chicago provided me with the funds that I needed during the study. A Crown Fellowship from 2005 to 2008 and a Fourth Year Fellowship during the 2008-2009 school year allowed me to focus on my research and writing.

For Yoon Sun and Juna

PREFACE

My dissertation investigates the essential mechanism of ideology through the prism of the debate between Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan. Althusser and Lacan were two of the most prominent French theorists of the late 20th century. Their theoretical convergence and divergence literally defined an important phase of the history of Freudo-Marxism. When they made a theoretical alliance in the early 1960s, they seemed to be making a decisive progress in establishing a new link between Marxism and Freudianism via their shared interests in the questions of structure and subject. This alliance did not last long, however: Lacan soon made a public criticism of Althusser in one of his seminars, while Althusser, though much later, wrote an essay which explicitly showed his dissatisfaction with Lacan's theory.

In her biography, *Jacques Lacan*, Elisabeth Roudinesco offers us a sharp contrast between the positions occupied by Althusser and Lacan as follows: "Lacan . . . had traveled in the opposite direction from Althusser. Hence his constantly renewed attachment to Lévi-Strauss's idea of symbolic function. While Althusser believed that only by escaping from all filial symbolism could one achieve a founding act, Lacan showed that, on the contrary, while such an escape might indeed produce logical discourse, such discourse would be invaded by psychosis."¹ Many readers today may be

¹ Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. B. Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 301-02.

dumbfounded by this passage, since the picture presented here about the two theorists is diametrically opposed to the picture they tend to hold true. In the latter picture, Althusser is depicted as an unyielding structuralist who disallowed the subject any chance to escape from the dominant ideology, while Lacan is portrayed as a genuine critic of such a position, who, by stressing the irreducible dimension of the real, showed how the subject might be able to find a way to subvert the entire symbolic structure.

Of course, this latter picture cannot simply be whisked away as a theoretically unfounded popular belief. Althusser indeed began to be criticized as a structuralist (or a functionalist) not long after his famous essay on “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” was published. This criticism seemed to receive its long waited foundation as well as its theoretical weight when Slavoj Žižek wrote *The Sublime Object of Ideology* to confirm its validity precisely by comparing Althusser’s theory with Lacan’s. Twenty years after its publication, we still see this text heavily determines the way in which both Althusser and Lacan are perceived by various academic communities. So much so that even a critic like Ian Parker, so unsympathetic toward Žižek, embraces the idea that the latter’s criticism of Althusser is valid and reliably represents Lacan’s own position.²

Should one think, then, that Roudinesco was simply mistaken? Much more recently, however, Yoshiyuki Sato made a similar argument in his *Pouvoir et résistance* by insisting that it is Lacan who took the most intransigent structuralist position in the whole debate that unfolded around the question of the subject in France during the 1960s and 70s, and that the theoretical works of (the later) Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Althusser

² Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 86.

all may be viewed as various attempts to distance themselves from such a position of Lacan's. According to Sato, Lacan's entire theory can be characterized by its emphasis upon the "absolute passivity" of the subject in relation to the symbolic structure.³ Should one think, then, that the current dominant picture which says otherwise is simply mistaken?

I position myself among those who claim that Lacan was a much more orthodox structuralist than Althusser was; however, I simultaneously argue that it is crucial to see their agreements as well as their disagreements. In other words, we should begin our discussion by recognizing that structuralism itself was not a unified school of thought, and, therefore, the respective relationships that Althusser and Lacan developed with it cannot be thought of in a manner of all or nothing. Insofar as they both tried to move the category of the subject from a *constituting* position to a *constituted* one, Althusser and Lacan were both great structuralists.⁴ They did not simply nullify the category of the subject (including its activity and autonomy) but tried to *explain* it by investigating through what process and mechanism the subject is constituted as one who recognizes itself as autonomous while still depending upon the structure in a certain way. Only after clearly delineating their common interest in this way can one possibly begin to inquire into the different choices they made in their own theoretical works.

³ Yoshiyuki Sato, *Pouvoir et résistance: Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Althusser* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), p. 57.

⁴ Étienne Balibar, "Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?", *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 14.1 (2003), pp. 1-21.

In order to carry out such an inquiry, I propose to revisit Žižek's discussion of the Althusser-Lacan debate in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Žižek interprets the debate principally by referring to the difference between the two levels installed in the Lacanian graph of desire. He identifies the lower level with the symbolic and the upper one with the symbolic shot through by the real. His claim is that, while Althusser limits himself to the lower level in which the "alienation" of the subject in the symbolic transpires, Lacan adds yet another level in which the dimension of the real (*jouissance*) is introduced, and thus the "separation" of the subject from the symbolic itself becomes conceivable. I contest this view by arguing that it is much more appropriate to identify the lower level with the imaginary and the upper one with the symbolic. Žižek's misapprehension results from neglecting the crucial distinction Lacan makes between *the symbolic that arrives in advance* in the imaginary phase itself and *the symbolic proper* (the pure symbolic dissociated at the upper level from the imaginary). Due to such a misreading, Žižek constantly misses the fact that Lacan considered his notion of separation only a separation from the mother, which the subject can achieve under the condition that it is absolutely dependent upon the metaphor of the father.

Žižek's portrayal of the debate, furthermore, fails to notice that, when the two theorists collided with each other on the question of structuralism in the late 1960s, something completely different was at stake. The point of the debate did not really concern whether or not the subject can separate itself from the structure, but how the ideological formation of the subject as a social practice is to be situated in relation to other social practices such as the economical or the political. Instead of focusing on the

theoretically sterile opposition between the subject and the structure, I try to locate the central debate between Althusser and Lacan in another question: namely, how are we to understand the articulations of different social instances? While investigating this question, we find that it was actually Lacan who upheld structuralism in this debate by understanding the relation between different social practices according to the logic of “structural homology” and reducing specificities of individual disciplines to the presumed generality of linguistics. Althusser, on the other hand, viewed both linguistics and psychoanalysis as regional theories and proposed to construct general theories by means of which the differential relations between various objects of regional theories could be articulated. It was due to the absence of such general theories that Lacan, beginning with his famous claim that “the unconscious is structured like language,” was more and more led to believe that linguistics (or psychoanalysis “allied to linguistics”) could play the role of the “mother-discipline” of all the other human sciences.

As Michel Pêcheux, one of Althusser’s disciples, later showed in his own theorizations, Althusser’s attempt to construct general theories (especially, the theory of discourse) shed new light on the question of ideological struggle and revolt. By conceptually differentiating the level of language (as a set of signifiers that are in themselves politically neutral) and the level of discourse (as a set of combinations and articulations of the same signifiers, which can be highly political), Althusser paved the way to a theorization of ideological revolt without regressing into the idealist dichotomies confined to the level of language: namely, langue/parole, structure/subject, and necessity/contingency.

Through such a study, I attempt to show that it is Althusser who may better assist us in understanding the logic of politics of resistance and emancipation, insofar as he endeavored to discover a possibility of revolt immanent to ideology without presupposing the metaphysical outside, the Archimedean point called subject. While admitting that Althusser faced difficulty in this theoretical effort, I maintain that such difficulty did not arise from his refusal of the Lacanian idea of the “subject of the unconscious” located “beyond interpellation” but from his non-critical acceptance of a seemingly self-evident proposition of classical Marxism: namely, “the dominant ideology is the ideology of the dominant class.” This tautological proposition made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to sufficiently analyze contradictions and struggles internally inscribed in the dominant ideology itself. I examine the debate that took place in 1978 between Althusser and Etienne Balibar, another disciple of his, to show how one can find a way out of Althusser’s predicament concerning the question of revolt while still remaining loyal to his overall doctrine.

My dissertation, however, does not dismiss Lacan’s problematic; quite the contrary, while taking a distance from mainstream interpretations, it proposes to regard him as a theorist of civility who tried to tackle the issue of extreme violence. His famous formulation of “the name of the father” can be viewed best as a theoretical attempt to recognize a positive hegemonic dimension of ideology which plays an important role in reducing extreme violence, a role that revolutionary politics cannot easily ignore. While reading his posthumously published texts on Niccolo Machiavelli, I demonstrate that

Althusser himself was drawn near such a theoretical motif of Lacan's. I examine convergences and divergences in their attempts to theorize a politics of civility.

The following is a preliminary explanation of some of the technical terms used in this dissertation.⁵

The Graph of Desire

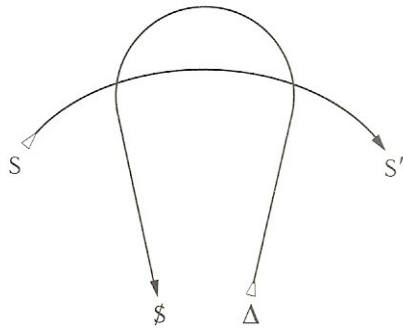


Fig. 1. The Elementary Cell of the Graph of Desire⁶

We can find a full explanation of the graph of desire in Lacan's essay "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire." The graph is presented as a topological representation of the dialectical development of what Lacan calls the "elementary cell" (see Fig. 1). The elementary cell represents a minimal structure in which a subject is formed while a signifying chain is sliding before it. Let us imagine a situation in which a sentence is being spoken to us; the meaning of each word is not fixed until the sentence is completed. For example, the first signifier of the simple sentence "I

⁵ While preparing this explanation, I have referred to Dylan Evans, *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The Complete Edition*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 681.

go to school.” can mean different things. It can mean the subjective form of ‘me,’ but it can also mean the alphabet letter ‘I’. Its meaning becomes fixed only when we hear out the complete sentence. Therefore, one must carry out a retroactive operation through which the meaning of each word is carved out of the sentence. Although, in this case, it is the period that functions as what Lacan calls a “quilting point” (*point de caption*, namely a point at which the indefinite sliding of signifiers is stopped by a short circuit between a signifier and its signified), this situation can be generalized in such a way that language as such is considered to be in need of quilting points. An infant before language acquisition faces this general situation. It experiences language as a senseless Thing (*das Ding*). It is only when a quilting point is somehow given that the infant begins to understand language and thus is formed as a subject of the signifier (marked as the divided subject $\$$ at the bottom left corner of the elementary cell).

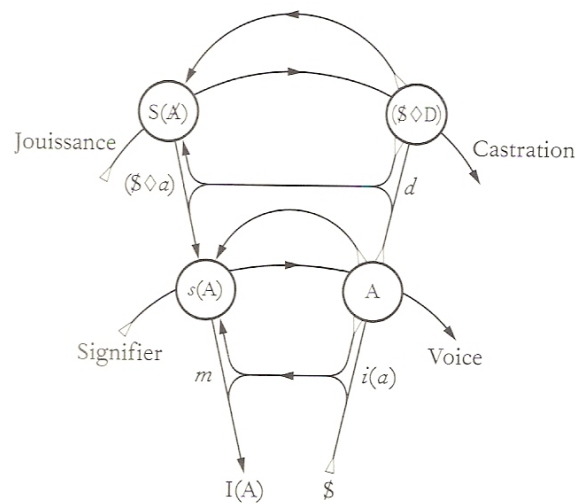


Fig. 2. The Complete Graph of Desire⁷

⁷ Lacan, *Écrits: The Complete Edition*, p. 692.

This elementary cell develops into a full-fledged graph (see Fig. 2) according to a dialectical logic that Lacan elaborates in a complicated way. But, basically, the graph has two levels, the lower and the upper level, which can be called the level of “alienation” and that of “separation” respectively (these names themselves have been taken mainly from *Seminar XI*).

The Real/The Symbolic/The Imaginary (RSI)

It is difficult to define technical terms such as the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary, precisely because the definition of each term is at issue. However, some commonplace explanation can serve as a starter. The imaginary is the term that designates the dual relationship formed in the mirror stage between the ego and its specular image. An infant recognizes itself by narcissistically identifying with its own image in a mirror. But this recognition is simultaneously a misrecognition, if only for the simple reason that the infant is not really there in the mirror looking at itself. Some of the indications of such a misrecognition can be given, for example, in the phenomenon of the left-right inversion. According to Lacan, the ego thus formed in the imaginary is rather the site in which the subject is alienated from itself. The symbolic, on the other hand, is related to language, especially the structural dimension of signifiers. Lacan’s famous formula states: “The unconscious is structured like language.”⁸ The symbolic is therefore the discourse of the unconscious which belongs to the realm of the Other. In contrast to the dual relationship of the imaginary, the symbolic is characterized by its triadic relationship. For example, the dual relationship between mother and son is, in the

⁸ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI)*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 20.

symbolic order, mediated and regulated by the third term: Father. Hence, the symbolic is also the realm of the Law which regulates desire. Finally, the real is “what resists symbolization absolutely.”⁹ Hence, it is also the impossible: it cannot ever be given a symbolic account nor can it be integrated into the subject’s sense of reality (in this context Lacan occasionally makes a sharp distinction between the real and reality). The real constitutes the traumatic kernel of the symbolic. The symbolic revolves around it, avoiding it, displacing it, but never successfully flying from it. Thus, Lacan offers the following definition of the real: “the real is that which always returns to the same place.”¹⁰ Despite all its attempts, the subject cannot ultimately avoid the real, since it is the symbolic chain itself that preserves its place in the form of a void. Without excluding the real, the symbolic could not have come into being in the first place. The real, therefore, is an exception to the rule, not simply in the sense that it falls outside the rule, but in the sense that it is what constitutes both the possibility and the impossibility of the rule. Lacan makes up a neologism “extimacy”¹¹ in order to describe such a double-binding relationship between the real and the symbolic.

⁹ Lacan, *Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953–54 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I)*, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), p. 66.

¹⁰ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII)*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ADL* Althusser, *L'Avenir dure longtemps, suivi de Les Faits. Nouvelle édition*, éd. Olivier Corpet et Yann Moulier Boutang (Paris: Éditions Stock / IMEC, 2007).
- DNP* Lacan, *Des Noms-du-Père*, éd. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).
- EC* Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977).
- HC* Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. F. Matheron, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2003).
- LP* Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
- MU* Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. François Matheron, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2000).
- PSH* Althusser, *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines: Deux conférences* (Paris: Le livre de poche, 1996).
- Se I* Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–54 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I)*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. J. Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988).
- Se VII* Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII)*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. D. Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).
- Se XI* Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI)*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).
- Se XX* Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-73 (Encore, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX)*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

- Sf V* Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient*, éd. J.-A. Miller, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).
- Sf XXIII* Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII: Le sinthome*, éd. J.-A. Miller, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).
- SOI* Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989).
- SR* Althusser, *Sur la reproduction* (Paris: PUF, 1995).
- WP* Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, ed. O. Corpet & F. Matheron, tr. J. Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)

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ABSTRACT

Slavoj Žižek argues that, if Althusser was an adamant structuralist who reduced subject to a mere function of ideology, Lacan was a genuine critic of such a position, who showed how the subject can separate itself from the symbolic structure of ideology. Žižek's portrayal of the debate, however, is not only based on a misapprehension of Lacan's own theory but also fails to notice that, when the two theorists collided on the question of structuralism in the late 1960s, the issue was not the separation, but how ideology as a social practice is to be situated in relation to other social practices. In this debate, it was actually Lacan who upheld structuralism.

Based on this rectified picture of the debate, I argue that Althusser may better assist us in understanding the logic of politics of emancipation. I maintain that the difficulty Althusser faced in his theorization of ideological revolt did not arise from his refusal of Lacan's idea of the subject of the unconscious located "beyond interpellation" but from his non-critical acceptance of a proposition of classical Marxism which tautologically defines the dominant ideology as the ideology of the dominant class.

My dissertation, however, does not dismiss Lacan's problematic; quite the contrary, it proposes to regard him as a theorist of civility who tried to tackle the issue of extreme violence. Moreover, I demonstrate that Althusser himself was drawn near such a

theoretical motif of Lacan's in some of his posthumously published texts on Machiavelli.
I examine convergences and divergences in their attempts to theorize a politics of civility.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM OR TOWARD THE SYMBOLIC?

A CRITIQUE OF ŽIŽEK'S *THE SUBLIME OBJECT OF IDEOLOGY*

Žižek's Construal of the Althusser-Lacan Debate

In the introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek points out that the famous contemporary debate between Habermas and Foucault represses another debate whose theoretical implication is far more important: the “Althusser-Lacan debate.” Žižek claims that the latter debate has been repressed because it brings to the forefront the issue of ideology which constitutes the “traumatic kernel” that the Habermas-Foucault debate does not want to face directly. According to him, each theorist in this double debate represents one of the “four different notions of the subject” along with their respective “ethical position” (*SOI*, 2). Habermas's subject is the linguistically revamped version of the “old subject of transcendental reflection” whose universalistic ideal lies in establishing and mastering the transparent intersubjective communication; whereas Foucault's subject is the aestheticized antiuniversalistic one whose tradition goes back to the Renaissance ideal of the “all-round” individual capable of mastering its passions and thus turning his own life into a work of art. Žižek argues that, despite the surface difference concerning universalism, they both enter the humanist tradition which highlights the supreme importance of the subject's self-mastery or self-transparency.

Althusser, on the other hand, represents a crucial break from this tradition insofar as he lays down the idea that the subject can never master itself because it is always in ideology that it recognizes itself as a subject; ideology in this sense is one of the fundamental conditions that accompany all its activities. Hence, the Althusserian subject, radically alienated “in the symbolic ‘process without subject’” (*SOI*, 3), is in fact a *non*-subject more or less completely reducible to a mere effect of ideology. To this Althusserian subject, Žižek opposes the Lacanian subject which is defined by the irreducible distance that separates the real from its symbolization. According to this view, there is always a remainder or a surplus that resists the “symbolic integration-dissolution”; this remainder is what in turn gives rise to the dimension of desire through which the subject finally comes across a chance to separate itself from the symbolic structure. From Žižek’s point of view, the famous Lacanian motto, “not to give way on one’s desire,” which is attributed to the indomitable tragic figure Antigone, sums up the ethical position proper to this kind of subject. It is not an attempt to return to the ethics of self-mastery, but on the contrary to subvert the symbolic structure that determines the very “self” or the “ego.” Žižek illustrates this difference between Althusser and Lacan by referring to the difference between the two levels installed in the Lacanian graph of desire (*SOI*, 124). While Althusser limits himself to the lower level in which the “alienation” of the subject in the symbolic transpires, Lacan adds to this yet another level in which the dimension of the real (*jouissance*) is introduced, and thus the separation of the subject from the symbolic becomes conceivable.

Although I am sympathetic towards Žižek's view that emphasizes the importance of the Althusser-Lacan debate suppressed from the contemporary intellectual scene, nevertheless I am not in agreement with his way of characterizing the debate. There are at least two major problems that I see. The first one concerns the far too one-sided characteristic of the picture Žižek presents to us about the debate. Never trying to carefully reconstruct the way in which the debate actually unfolded, he is content simply to pass judgment on the alleged shortcomings of Althusser's theory by imposing the Lacanian theoretical grid directly upon it. This imposition is problematic, not only because it ignores the respective ways in which the two theories were developed, but because it tends to give readers an impression that Lacan designed his theory, especially his graph of desire, at least in part to refute Althusser's position, or that Althusser was criticized in a more or less unilateral manner by Lacan in this "debate."

To see such an impression is questionable, it suffices to take into account some of the relevant historical facts. Lacan's essay that becomes Žižek's central reference point in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is, without doubt, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious." It was originally written as a contribution to the *La Dialectique* conference held at Royaumont in 1960; it was printed in *Écrits* in 1966, just one year after the publication of Althusser's *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital*. On the other hand, Althusser's essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," which becomes the major target of Žižek's criticism, was written in 1969 (published in 1970). There was no significant reply from Lacan's side to this essay.

Rather it was Althusser who later made a criticism of Lacan, especially in his 1976 essay “The Discovery of Dr. Freud.” Lacan again did not reply. The only explicit criticism Lacan ever made against Althusser is found in the first two sessions of his *Seminar XVI* (1968-69), which preceded the publication of Althusser’s essay on ideology by more than one year; naturally, it did not directly address the issues raised by Althusser’s formulation of “ideological interpellation.”

Having this picture in mind, one might arrive at a hypothesis quite different from Žižek’s own. His claim is that the graph of desire proposed by Lacan has two levels, while Althusser’s theory has only one; this contrast in and of itself shows the weakness of the Althusserian theory which overemphasizes the role of the *symbolic* (or the symbolic identification) and ignores the dimension of the real. However, if Lacan’s graph was proposed in 1960, and Althusser’s thesis on ideology in 1969, is it not more likely the case that Althusser *rejected* the second level of the graph while accepting perhaps with certain modifications the first level only? Of course, one can still possibly argue that Althusser did not reject it, but rather simply missed it. However, as I already mentioned, he did make a criticism of Lacan in the 1970s. Then is it not rather fair to check out the points of his criticism first? However, Žižek oddly enough never mentions this criticism or the essay in which it appears.

The second problem closely connected to the first one concerns Žižek’s interpretation of the Lacanian graph of desire itself. He identifies the lower level with the symbolic, and the upper one with the symbolic cut through by the real. However, it seems

much more appropriate to me to identify the lower level with the imaginary and the upper with the symbolic. The real intervenes in the form of “anxiety” as some sort of catalyst to make the transition possible from the imaginary to the symbolic. In this perspective, it is Lacan who appears to insist on the necessity of the symbolic. Althusser, on the other hand, seems to problematize it by rejecting (or “missing”) the upper level in his theory of ideology. Hence, the crucial question we must ask ourselves is: are we moving *from or toward the symbolic* when we make a transition from the lower level to the upper? By differentiating *the symbolic that arrives in advance* from *the symbolic proper*, I will try to show in this article that the lower level indeed represents the imaginary, while the upper level represents the symbolic.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek’s criticism of Althusser appears at two different places: initially in chapter 1, titled “How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?” and then again in chapter 3, titled “Che Vuoi?” which specifically deals with the question of the two levels in the graph of desire. In the following section, I will discuss chapter 1, in which he alleges that Althusser missed the Kafkaesque dimension of the real, namely what he calls the “interpellation without identification/subjectivation.” In the last section, I will question Žižek’s interpretation of the graph of desire by engaging myself in a textual analysis of Lacan’s “The Subversion of the Subject.”

The Encounter with *das Ding*

In chapter 1 of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek attacks Althusser’s theory of ideology by making use of Lacan’s discussion of *das Ding* that appears in *The Ethics of*

Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII). In order to criticize Althusser for still taking an epistemological approach on ideology, Žižek raises the issue of the “objectivity of belief” which cannot be defeated or corrected by the subject’s gaining proper knowledge. He illustrates his point with the example of commodity fetishism: everyone *knows* that money is a piece of paper, while they *act* as if it were the embodiment of wealth in its immediate reality. Everyone in capitalism is a fetishist in practice—not in theory.¹

How does this commodity fetishism become possible? It becomes possible as the subject misrecognizes itself as an autonomous player in market merely pursuing its own self-interests while in truth it is the external *Things* (the social institutions of market) that think and act in place of the subject. This inversion of the active-passive relationship between the subject and the external market apparatuses is what places commodity fetishism well out of the range of the usual kind of criticism which simply condemns it as a subjective illusion. Our fetishistic belief in money, in other words, is not really ours but the objective belief that Things themselves have for us.

Žižek generalizes this point by linking it to the question of external obedience to the law. What he means by this is the subject’s obedience in its external behavior: if it behaves according to the law, it does not matter whether it truly believes that the law is right. He argues that such external obedience is not the same as submission to the

¹ Commodity fetishism, in the Marxian tradition, designates the phenomenon that men’s relations are expressed as objectified relations of things in the capitalist market. Fetishism in the Freudian tradition, on the other hand, designates the phenomenon that the child puts an object in place of the mother’s missing penis in order to disavow the “fact” of castration.

nonideological “brute force” represented in Althusser’s theory by the repressive state apparatus; it is rather what remains totally unthought of by Althusser, namely “obedience to the Command in so far as it is ‘incomprehensible,’ not understood; in so far as it retains a ‘traumatic’ ‘irrational’ character” (*SOI*, 37).

Now we can clearly see that this is the same kind of argument Lacan makes in his *Seminar VII* while discussing the role of *das Ding* in establishing the authority of the moral commands. The mute *Wort als Ding* (*le mot* rather than *la parole*, and the signifier *without* the signified) is precisely what seems to the subject incomprehensible, traumatic and irrational. “*Das Ding*,” says Lacan, “is that which I will call the beyond-of-the-signified” (*Se VII*, 54). It is the signifier (or a chain of signifiers) that is not yet experienced by the subject as a meaning, but simply imposed upon it from without as a persisting piece of reality. This is ultimately what Lacan refers to as the real: “that dumb reality which is *das Ding*” (*Se VII*, 55).² Why dumb? It is because it does not yet generate any meaning for the subject to understand; all it does is to stubbornly refer to itself as a signifier. Lacan identifies this dumb self-referential characteristic of the signifier as the secret source of the authority of moral commands by associating it with the (social) “reality principle” capable of restraining the subject’s “pleasure principle.” He argues that the Kantian categorical imperative as a pure structure lacking any empirical content or meaning is *das Ding par excellence*. It is from this standpoint that Žižek launches a full attack on Althusser:

² Of course, here one should take into account the fact that in this seminar Lacan still uses the two terms “reality” and “the real” interchangeably

Althusser speaks only of the process of ideological interpellation through which the symbolic machine of ideology is ‘internalized’ into the ideological experience of Meaning and Truth: but we can learn from Pascal that this ‘internalization’, by structural necessity, never fully succeeds, that there is always a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it, and that this leftover, *far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is the very condition of it*: it is precisely this non-integrated surplus of senseless traumatism which confers on Law its unconditional authority; in other words, which . . . sustains what we might call the ideological *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense (enjoy-meant), proper to ideology. (SOI, 43-44; original emphasis)

Ideology produces a meaning enjoyable for the subject only when the latter internalizes its symbolic machine comprised of a series of meaningless signifiers *als Ding*. This internalization/symbolization, however, cannot fully succeed because *das Ding* qua the real, by definition, resists symbolization. There is always something remaining outside of the meaning and truth that ideology provides for the subject. This remainder may appear to be a completely unnecessary thing which rather gets in the way of ideology’s smooth operation; but, in truth, it is what constitutes the very materiality that sustains the spiritualized *jouis-sense* experienced by the subject. In order to draw attention to this nonsensical surplus dimension supporting ideology, Žižek proposes, against Althusser, that there is an interpellation which *precedes* or *preconditions* any ideological identification or subjectivation. He does so by calling out Kafka as a critic of Althusser. Žižek argues:

And again, it was no accident that we mentioned the name of Kafka concerning this ideological *jouis-sense*[:] we can say that Kafka develops a kind of criticism of Althusser *avant la lettre*, in letting us see that which is constitutive of the gap between ‘machine’ and its ‘internalization.’ Is not Kafka’s ‘irrational’ bureaucracy, this blind, gigantic, nonsensical apparatus, precisely the Ideological State Apparatus with which a subject is confronted before any identification, any recognition—any

subjectivation—takes place? . . . This interpellation . . . is, so to say, *an interpellation without identification/subjectivation*. (SOI, 44; original emphasis)

Hence, the experience of the nonsensical bureaucratic machine that Kafka depicts in *The Castle*, for example, exhibits the dimension of the interpellation without identification/subjectivation, which forms a *precondition* for every possible generation of symbolic meaning. However, insofar as *das Ding*, the Castle, is characterized as something that cannot be exhaustively internalized or symbolized, there is always still a remainder or a reminder that returns and functions as a *postcondition*, so to speak, for the effective working of the symbolic law. This is why Žižek, right after introducing the idea of “interpellation without identification,” links it to the idea of *objet petit a* and the Lacanian formula of fantasy: $\$ \diamond a$, both of which in principle can emerge only *after* the internalization of the symbolic machine. Let us also point out in passing that for Žižek this leftover is what will linger as something extremely ambivalent in its effects insofar as it simultaneously allows the subject a chance to separate itself from the symbolic law as in the case of Antigone or Christ.

At this point, however, I would like to bring in a piece of counterevidence that sufficiently shows that Althusser’s theory indeed has the dimension of what Žižek calls the “interpellation without identification/subjectivation.” Taking seriously the Lacanian thesis that the symbolic law *arrives in advance*,³ Althusser in “Freud and Lacan” (1964) argues: “These two moments [of the imaginary and the symbolic] are dominated,

³ Lacan’s own thesis can be found in “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (EC, 231).

governed and marked by a single law, the law of the symbolic. . . . [T]he moment of the imaginary [is] the first moment in which the child lives its *immediate* intercourse with a human being (its mother) *without recognizing it practically as the symbolic intercourse it is* (i.e., as the intercourse of a small *human* child with a *human* mother)” (*LP*, 210; original emphasis).

Contrary to Žižek’s claim, here Althusser clearly acknowledges the bare existence of the symbolic machine at work that is not yet experienced by an individual (the child) as the meaning and truth of the law. The child’s initial intercourse with the mother is an *immediate* one; there are no meanings produced yet. The child only experiences the mother *als Ding*—the Thing that speaks—and not as a “*human* mother” loaded with *meanings*. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” too, Althusser insists on the Pascalian thesis—“Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”—in order to indicate that it is the subjection (and not the subjectivation)⁴ of an individual to the rituals themselves that is both logically primary and chronologically prior in every ideological interpellation: “[An individual’s] ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject” (*LP*, 169). Hence, it is only natural that the nonsensical, self-referential, dumb characteristic of the law that Žižek reveals with the tautological proposition, “Law is Law” (*SOI*, 36), is in

⁴ Subjectivation takes place at the level of signification, allowing the subject a full access to the meanings of signs; whereas subjection (*assujétissement*) takes place at the level of affects, forcing the bodily submission of an individual to meaningless signifiers.

fact one of the crucial points that Althusser himself makes while discussing the example of Christian religious ideology. The only difference here is that, for Althusser, the prominent example is found in the biblical story of Moses: that is, God's answer to him, "I am that I am" (*LP*, 179), instead of "Law is Law."⁵

Yet, is it not also such a tautological characteristic of the law that Lacan points out at the very end of his exposition of the *lower* level of the graph of desire? Lacan writes in "The Subversion of the Subject":

Let us set out from the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. *Any statement of authority has no other guarantee than its very enunciation*, and it is pointless for it to seek it in another signifier, which could not appear outside this locus in any way. Which is what I mean when I say that no metalanguage can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. (*EC*, 311; emphasis added)

It is up to this point that Althusser more or less seems to agree with Lacan. What he does not really agree with is Lacan's construction of the *upper* level of the graph of desire. What is the reason for this disagreement, then?

⁵ For this reason, Judith Butler, for example, argues in her essay "Althusser's Subjection": "[T]he point, *both* Althusserian *and* Lacanian, [is] that the anticipations of grammar are always and only retroactively installed. . . . Wittgenstein remarks, 'We speak, we utter words, and only later get a sense of their life.' Anticipation of such sense governs the 'empty' ritual that is speech, and ensures its iterability. In this sense, then, we must neither first believe before we kneel nor know the sense of the words before we speak" (*The Psychic Life of Power* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997], 124; emphasis added). Mladen Dolar, on the other hand, tries to supplement Žižek's original criticism of Althusser by making a further claim that Althusser misses the crucial difference that separates his emphasis on the "non-sensical materiality" of institutions and practices from Lacan's own emphasis on the "immaterial" characteristic of the "symbolic automatism" (Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation", in: *Qui parle*, vol. 6, number 2 [Berkeley: University of California press, spring/summer 1993], 90-91). However, this is merely a fictive issue Dolar himself created, since it is above all Lacan who emphasizes that what gives rise to "repetition automatism" is "the materiality of the signifier" (*EC*, 10; 16). I will engage in a full discussion of Dolar's position as well as Butler's in chapter 3.

Before we proceed with such a question, however, let us discuss another crucial point that Althusser makes with respect to the nature of the child-mother relationship in “Freud and Lacan.” His claim is quite surprising: he maintains that the initial relationship that the child has with the mother is the *imaginary* one rather than the real. We should be clear about this. For Althusser, what is imaginary is not the mother herself as a Thing, but the immediate relationship that the child has with her before it enters the symbolic order proper. Therefore, to characterize the relationship between the child and the mother as imaginary does not necessarily mean that the dimension of the real is ignored. It means, instead, that the relationship between the imaginary and the real is thought of in a more complicated way. They are not caught up in the epistemological dichotomy of the true and the false. This is precisely why later in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” Althusser defines ideology not simply as a distorted representation of the real but as “a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (*LP*, 162). Then, what is represented in ideology with more or less distortions is not the real itself, but individuals’ imaginary *relationship* to it, that is to say, the specific way or mode in which individuals live or experience the real. Therefore, ideology is neither a lie fabricated by “Priests or Despots” for the purpose of deceiving the masses (the Hobbesian idea of ideology), nor a result of the general ignorance of the masses (the Platonist idea of ideology). Nor is it even an illusory product of alienation or alienated labor (the Feuerbachian idea of ideology that Marx follows in *The Jewish Question*).⁶ It is, rather, a social relationship that is as material as other kinds of social

⁶ Cf. Etienne Balibar, “The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser,” *The Althusserian Legacy*, ed. E. Ann

relationships (for example, the economical one). It is a relationship in which concrete individuals are interpellated into subjects of the society. The Kantian idea of *constituting* subjects is substituted for by the structuralist idea of *constituted* subjects. Althusser writes: “The category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (*LP*, 171)

Let us, however, pay attention right away to the fact that what we see in Althusser’s final formulation of ideology is the imaginary and the real—*not* the symbolic.

Throughout the essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” he never uses the term “symbolic.” This is quite astonishing, since, according to Žižek, what Althusser lacks by missing the upper level of the graph of desire is the real, and not the symbolic. Why this discrepancy? From my point of view, it is because Althusser views the lower level as the imaginary and the upper level as the symbolic (he just avoids theorizing ideology in terms of the pure symbolic), whereas Žižek sees the lower level as the symbolic, and the upper level as the symbolic cut through by the real (*jouissance*). Then, how about Lacan’s own account of the graph? His perspective laid out in “The Subversion of the Subject” is much closer to Althusser’s view than to Žižek’s. Žižek, by imposing his own view upon Lacan’s graph of desire, not only distorts his intention behind the construction of the graph of desire but also makes Althusser’s criticism of the upper level unintelligible.

The Issue of the Upper Level of the Lacanian Graph of Desire

What is the central question that Lacan tries to answer when he constructs the graph of desire? We can properly locate this question where Lacan makes a transition from the explanation of the lower level to that of the upper one. Right after he concludes his discussion of the lower level by pointing out the tautological nature of the authority of the law, Lacan states:

The fact that the Father may be regarded as the original representative of this authority of the Law requires us to specify by what privileged mode of presence he is sustained beyond the subject who is led to really occupy the place of the Other, namely, the Mother. The question is thus pushed back a step. (*EC*, 688)

Reading such a statement, we realize that the big Other that we encounter at the lower level of the graph is not the father, but actually the mother.⁷ The whole construction of the upper level, then, was intended to show why the symbolic order of the father is still necessary besides the imaginary order of the mother, and how the transition is made from the latter to the former. This is also why, toward the end of the discussion of the upper level, Lacan confirms: “The shift of (-φ) (lowercase phi) as phallic image from one side to the other of the equation between the imaginary and the symbolic renders it positive in any case, even if it fills a lack. Although it props up (-1), it becomes Φ (capital phi), the symbolic phallus that cannot be negativized, the signifier of jouissance” (*EC*, 697). Through what, then, does this transition from the imaginary to the

⁷ Žižek understands this transition in reverse way. After linking the symbolic identification at the lower level to the “Name-of-the-Father,” Žižek relates the “*Che Vuoi?*” of the upper-level to the function of the mother (see *SOI*, 121).

symbolic occur? It only occurs through “castration,” which is found at the right hand corner of the upper level, which truly ends the whole graph of desire.

Hence, as Althusser argues, what the lower level depicts is the *imaginary* relationship that the child has with its mother; whereas the upper level describes the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic or, according to Lacan’s own expression, the “symbolization of the imaginary” (*EC*, 695). Žižek, on the other hand, confines the imaginary only to the ideal ego, *i(a)*, of the lower part of the lower level of the graph, while considering the ego-ideal, *I(A)*, as the *symbolic proper*. After distinguishing *I(A)* *qua* the place from which the subject observes itself (a *structural* or *formal* place), from *i(a)* *qua* a collection of ideal features that one can imitate (*contents*), Žižek argues, “The only difference is that now identification [with *I(A)*] is no longer imaginary (. . . a model to imitate) but, at least in its fundamental dimension, symbolic . . . It is this *symbolic identification* that dissolves the imaginary identification [with *i(a)*]” (*SOI*, 110; emphasis added).⁸

I would not say that such an interpretation of Žižek’s is utterly wrong, since it is Lacan himself who seems to formulate the *i(a)* and the *I(A)* respectively as the imaginary and the symbolic. However, it must be pointed out right away that this simplistic distinction is rather misleading, and Žižek seems to fall victim to it. In his *Seminar I*, Lacan not only says, “the superego is essentially located within the symbolic plane of speech, *in contrast to* the ego-ideal,” but links the function of the ego-ideal to the

⁸ I have replaced *I(O)* and *i(o)* with *I(A)* and *i(a)*.

“imaginary structuration.”⁹ How should we then think of the two apparently opposing arguments, one of which says the ego-ideal, I(A), is symbolic, while the other says it is imaginary? Reading the following explanation of the ego-ideal from Dylan Evans’s *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* is helpful in understanding the issue:

In his post-war writings Lacan pays more attention to distinguishing the ego-ideal from the ideal-ego . . . Thus in the 1953-4 seminar, he develops the optical model to distinguish between these two formations. He argues that the ego-ideal is a symbolic *introjection*, whereas the ideal ego is the source of an imaginary projection . . . *The ego-ideal* is the signifier operating as ideal, *an internalized plan of the law*, the guide governing the subject’s position in the symbolic order, and hence *anticipates secondary (Oedipal) identification*.¹⁰

This explanation in itself seems contradictory, because it simultaneously says two apparently incompatible things: First, according to Evans’s *Dictionary*, the ego-ideal is something symbolic; second, the formation of the ego-ideal “anticipates” the secondary Oedipal identification. Does, then, this mean that the symbolic identification is not only different from the Oedipal identification but also precedes it? Žižek shares the same contradiction, since he argues that the symbolic identification already takes place at the lower level (what happens at the upper level is just that the symbolic thus generated at the lower level is cut through by *jouissance*, the real); in other words, Žižek is arguing that the symbolic identification takes place without going through the experience of the castration complex which is obviously placed at the upper level.

⁹ *Se I*, 102 (emphasis added); 141.

¹⁰ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 52 (emphasis added).

We would not be able to solve this riddle, unless we refer to the idea of *the symbolic that arrives in advance*, which Althusser emphasizes over and over again. As the *Dictionary* rightly points out, the ego-ideal is not really the result of symbolic identification, but that of “symbolic introjection.” This subtle difference is crucial: it shows that the ego-ideal is merely an introjection of the symbolic law which arrives in advance. Although, or precisely because, the symbolic law arrives in advance and thus is experienced by the subject *prematurely*, it is not experienced in a symbolic way, but merely in an imaginary way. The genuine symbolic identification, which is exactly what is meant by the “secondary (Oedipal) identification,” only comes *after* the child experiences the “castration complex,” as Lacan later shows in his essay. The primary identification that precedes such a secondary Oedipal identification is, of course, the imaginary identification whose effect is twofold: the formation of the $i(a)$ and that of the $I(A)$. Both formations are the two results of the same process of the identification which is *imaginary*.¹¹ Lacan explains:

This *imaginary* process, which goes from the specular image to the constitution of the ego along the path of subjectification by the signifier, is signified in my graph by the $\overrightarrow{i(a) \cdot e}$ vector, *which is one-way, but doubly articulated*, once in a short circuit of the $\overrightarrow{\$ \cdot I(A)}$, and second as a return route of $\overrightarrow{S \cdot s(A)}$. This shows that the ego is

¹¹ Lacan relates projection to the imaginary, and introjection to the symbolic in *Seminar I (Se I, 83)*. Later in *Le Séminaire, Livre VIII: Le transfert* (éd. J.-A. Miller, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001, pp. 416-17) he argues that this symbolic introjection is the “primordial identification with the father” that comes well *before* the subject enters the Oedipal situation in which symbolic identification takes place. This is exactly what the symbolic law that arrives in advance means. Before understanding the meaning of the symbolic law, the subject is pre-fixed by it at the “exquisitely virile” position from which it sees and desires the mother as an ideal ego. Hence, the triangle here is not the symbolic triangle, but the imaginary triangle of the child, the mother and the imaginary phallus (ϕ) that circulates between them.

only completed by being articulated not as the *I* of discourse, but as a metonymy of its signification (*EC*, 685; emphasis added).

Lacan's last sentence here is decisive for our discussion. According to Žižek, the I(A) is the place from which the subject observes itself. Through a "symbolic identification" (and not just through a simple introjection of the symbolic), the subject becomes able to put itself in the very place of the Other and thus observes itself from there. This also means that the subject has now become *its own master*. Žižek says: "he becomes an 'autonomous personality' through his identification with [the ego-ideal]" (*SOI*, 110). And yet we must realize that it is just unthinkable that the subject becomes its own master without simultaneously becoming "the *I* of discourse." According to Lacan's own argument, the completed ego of the lower-level process is not "the *I* of discourse," but merely "a metonymy of its signification." Lacan's argument here is only natural because the distinction between the enunciation and the statement (*énoncée*) is supposed to occur at the upper level of the graph. Žižek keeps bringing what belongs to the upper level down to the lower level. He would have been right if he had said that the game of mastery *begins* from the point where the distinction between the *i(a)* and I(A) is introduced; in other words, he is clearly in the wrong when he says that, at this stage of development, the subject *already* achieves its "autonomous personality." The structure and the vicissitude of such a dialectical game of mastery are in fact what Lacan attempts to demonstrate through the whole construction of the upper level of the graph of desire.¹²

¹² It is true that Lacan in *Seminar I* links the function of the ego-ideal to the question of the sight of the subject; however, he says that the ego-ideal is the place from which the subject observes *the ideal ego*. Of course, insofar as the ideal ego is also considered the mirror image of the ego itself, we may acquiesce in

As I mentioned earlier, Lacan's theoretical aim here is nothing but to provide a proper explanation of how the transition is made from the imaginary order to the symbolic. Lacan offers three different models of explanation by making a parallel distinction of three different kinds of death. The three models of explanation are: (1) the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave (*EC*, 686-87); (2) Freud's "latest-born myth" of the dead father who does not know he is dead (*EC*, 693-94); and finally (3) Freud's "castration complex" which is "not a myth" (*EC*, 695-98). The three kinds of death that respectively correspond to those three models are: (1) the imaginary death (this is why Lacan deals with the Hegelian dialectic while still explaining the lower level); (2) the real death (the father *really* died; he just does not know that he is dead); and finally (3) the symbolic death. And Lacan claims that it is only through the symbolic death that the "subversion of the subject" can be properly achieved. What he means by subversion here

Žižek's interpretation that the ego-ideal is the place from which the subject observes itself. But Žižek further claims that the ego ideal, unlike the ideal ego, is the place from which the subject can observe itself as likable *despite* its apparent defects (he argues this is why the subject is finally allowed a breathing space). However, in Lacan's own conceptualization, the ego-ideal should be defined as the place from which the subject can view itself as likable *because* all its defects seem to magically disappear. The ego-ideal is the "voice" that, by manipulating the inclination of the plane mirror placed at the center of the Lacanian "optical model," makes the subject see and desire the more or less successfully assembled image of itself. Lacan argues: "In other words, it's the symbolic relation which defines the position of the subject as seeing. It is speech, the symbolic relation, which determines the greater or lesser degree of perfection, of completeness, of approximation, of the imaginary. This representation allows us to draw the distinction between the *Idealich* and the *Ichideal* . . . The ego-ideal governs the interplay of relations on which all relations with others depend. And on this relation to others depends the more or less satisfying character of the imaginary structuration" (*Se I*, 141). In other words, the ego ideal is the Other's perspective in which the subject appears as an ideal image. In his more recent book on Lacan, Žižek rectifies his definition of ego ideal, and says, "Ego-Ideal is the agency whose gaze I try to impress with my ego image, the big Other who watches over me and impels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize" (*How to Read Lacan* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006], p. 80). This new definition is almost the opposite of his original definition, and it certainly approaches better Lacan's own; Žižek no longer considers the ego ideal as the place from which the subject sees itself as likable despite its apparent defects. Still, this new definition, as we can see, is not exactly the same as Lacan's own, which emphasizes the function of the ego-ideal that symbolically *structures* the ideal image of the ego for the subject.

has nothing to do with the revolutionary fiction that Žižek makes up out of Lacan's analysis of the upper level of the graph, namely the fiction in which the subject rises up against the symbolic law, and heroically dies while simultaneously demolishing it. In fact, the Lacanian subversion of the subject is pretty much the same as the Hegelian reversal of the subjective positions between master and slave; it is a matter of the slave's becoming his or her own master—an individual—and becoming free. Lacan's only contention with Hegel is that this reversal or subversion cannot be brought about through the proposed Hegelian dialectic of master and slave. After claiming that the important question to ask is not just the question of death, but exactly the question of “which death, the one that life brings or the one that brings life,” Lacan says:

This is clearly the theme of the cunning of reason, whose seductiveness is in no wise lessened by the error I pointed out above. The work, Hegel tells us, to which the slave submits in giving up jouissance out of fear of death, is precisely the path by which he achieves freedom. There can be no more obvious lure than this, politically and psychologically. Jouissance comes easily to the slave, and it leaves work in serfdom. . . . Paying truly unconscious homage to the story as written by Hegel, *he often finds his alibi in the death of the Master*. But what about this death? *In fact, it is from the Other's locus where he situates himself that he follows the game, thus eliminating all risk to himself—especially the risk of a joust, in a “self-consciousness” for which death is but a joke.* (EC, 686-87; emphasis added)

Lacan's argument, therefore, is that the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave cannot achieve its goal: the ultimate liberation of the slave subject (the child) from the master (the mother). It cannot do so because all it offers is just a game of imaginary death, that is, the death that involves no real risk and therefore is nothing but a “joke.” No liberation is possible, if no real confrontation with death is carried out.

Then, how about the real death? The real death, for Lacan, is what is paradigmatically expressed in the case of the death of Christ. According to Žižek, Lacan privileges Christianity, the religion of love, over Judaism, Abraham's religion of anxiety. Žižek argues that Christ is the ultimate answer because he is the one who becomes a "saint" by occupying "the place of *objet petit a*, of pure object, of somebody undergoing radical subjective destitution" (*SOI*, 116). Just like Antigone, he enters the realm of the real (that is, outside or beyond the symbolic) by never compromising his desire. The relation between him and the big Other is thus inverted. By simply persisting in his inert presence, he himself becomes a questionable subject for the big Other ("Che Vuoi?" or "What does he want?"), revealing that it is rather the big Other itself that lacks something and thus desires him qua a miserable bodily human being. He heroically embraces his own death while accomplishing the impossible, namely, the revolution that wipes out the symbolic order of the big Other of that time—the Jewish God.¹³

Is this, however, a correct interpretation of Lacan? First of all, Lacan never opposes Judaism to Christianity. Second, he privileges Abraham over Christ. Lacan says, "There is nothing doctrinal about our role. We need not answer for any ultimate truth; and certainly not for nor against any particular religion . . . No doubt the corpse is a signifier,

¹³ Žižek first identifies Christ with Antigone (*SOI*, 114-17), and then links Antigone's act of revolt to Walter Benjamin's notion of revolution ("the obliteration of the signifying network itself" or "the total 'wipe-out' of historical tradition"). Žižek writes: "If the Stalinist perspective is that of Creon, the perspective of the Supreme Good assuming the shape of the Common Good of the State, the perspective of Benjamin is that of Antigone—for Benjamin, revolution is an affair of life and death; more precisely: of the second, symbolic death" (*SOI*, 144). In his later works such as *For They Know Not What They Do* (London: Verso, 2002) and *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2000), Žižek renounces Antigone as a figure swayed by a fantasy of phallogentric heroism, while keeping Christ and Benjamin as true revolutionaries.

but Moses' tomb is as empty for Freud as that of Christ's was for Hegel. Abraham revealed his mystery to neither of them" (*EC*, 693) Therefore, the issue is not laid down as Judaism versus Christianity; Lacan puts into the same class Moses, who is definitely not a Christian, and Christ. Furthermore, the one who possesses the secret solution is not Christ but Abraham. Abraham did not let Christ know what he knew.

Why is Christ's real death not the ultimate answer to the question of a possible salvation of the subject? Lacan answers:

We cannot ask this question of the subject qua *I*. He is missing everything he needs in order to know the answer, since if this subject, *I*, was dead, he would not know it, as I said earlier. Thus he does not know that I'm alive. How, therefore, will *I* prove it to myself? For I can, at most, prove to the Other that he exists, not, of course, with the proofs of the existence of God, with which centuries have killed him, but by loving him, a solution introduced by the Christian *Kerygma*. *It is, in any case, too precarious a solution for us to even think of using it to circumvent our problem, namely: 'What am I?'* (*EC*, 694; emphasis added).

Hence, Lacan's argument is that one cannot achieve his salvation by embracing his own real death, namely by sacrificing himself for the love of the Other. He cannot do so because there remains the ultimate question that the self-sacrifice of Christ never properly answers: What am *I*? In other words, what is the use of the saintly love of the Other if I am dead, that is, if I turn into a Non-being? Thus we see Lacan continue, "*I* am in the place from which 'the universe is a flaw in the purity of Non-Being' is vociferated. And not without reason for, by protecting itself, this place makes Being itself languish. This place is called *Jouissance*, and it is *Jouissance* whose absence would render the universe vain" (*EC*, 694). In short, without *my* *jouissance*, the whole universe would be vain.

On the other hand, it is precisely Abraham who *survives* the big Other. The body of his precious son (the corpse, the signifier) does not disappear like Christ's or Moses's.

What is, then, the mystery that Abraham is holding in his hand without ever revealing it to Moses or Christ? The answer is the symbolic death, in which one dies *a little*.

Abraham kills his precious son *in a symbolic ritual*, and thus paradoxically brings life to him. Let us here remember Lacan's original question again: "We need to know which death, the one that life brings or the one that brings life." As we already saw, the first death brought by life is the imagined natural death of the master that Hegel's slave awaits indefinitely whereas the second death is the symbolic one through which life is finally brought to the subject.

Lacan links this notion of symbolic death to the problematic of castration complex. He declares this is indeed the moment of the "subversion": "In the castration complex we find the mainspring of the very subversion that I am trying to articulate here by means of its dialectic" (*EC*, 695). And yet the freedom that the subject finally achieves through the castration complex is not a freedom *from* the law, but a freedom *through* the law. Thus Lacan argues:

In fact, the image of the ideal Father is a neurotic's fantasy. Beyond the Mother—demand's real Other, whose desire (that is, her desire) we wish she would tone down—stands out the image of a father who would turn a blind eye to desire. *This marks—more than it reveals—the true function of the Father, which is fundamentally to unite (and not to oppose) a desire to the Law* (*EC*, 698; emphasis added)

Accordingly, it is just far from Lacan's intention to show how the symbolic law is cut through by the real (*jouissance*) and thus becomes vulnerable, allowing the subject to

heroically rise against the law of the father and fight it. What is cut through by *jouissance* is not the symbolic law of the father, but the child's own imaginary relationship with the mother which appears as an imaginary game of mastery and control (think of the famous *Fort-Da* game here). *Jouissance* that results from an infantile masturbation stirs up a great amount of anxiety in the child. This anxiety which manifests itself in the fantasmatic image of the child's being devoured by its mother, can be resolved only by the intervention from the side of the father who castrates the child and thus kills it a little. The two deaths, the imaginary death of the master (the mother) and the real death of Christ (the child), represent the child's failed attempts to become its own master while still staying in the imaginary relationship with its mother. The symbolic death is the escape the child finally finds. While being submitted to the law of the father, the child is simultaneously set free under the very same paternal law, because this law is the kind of law which does not exclude or repress the subject's desire but rather liberates it paradoxically by setting certain limits on it.

Now we can see why Althusser could not accept such a conclusion of the upper level of the Lacanian graph of desire. From Althusser's point of view, all that the upper level does is theoretically justify the necessity of the symbolic law of the father. In 1976, Althusser wrote two essays relevant to this issue: "The Discovery of Dr. Freud" and "Note on the ISAs." In "The Discovery of Dr. Freud," Althusser intensely criticizes Lacan and argues: "Lacan thus continued by constituting a whole theory distinguishing the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. Freud, who knew what was up when it came to

the unconscious, had never resorted to such a theory, in which all is conceived not as a function of the unconscious but as a function of the *symbolic*, that is, of language and the law and thus of the “name of the father” (WP, 90-91). We can clearly see from this that one of Althusser’s major complaints about Lacan’s theory indeed revolved around the symbolic, whose necessity Lacan tried to elevate to the level of scientific necessity by famously claiming that “a letter always arrives at its destination” (EC, 30). Criticizing such a necessity as a teleological illusion, Althusser opposed to it his “materialist thesis”: “it happens [il arrive] that a letter does not arrive at its destination” (WP, 92). Although he did not reject the notion of the symbolic in its entirety (he kept the idea of its early arrival which prepared for the subject an empty place within the ideological coordinates of a given society), it seems Althusser never accepted the idea that it was possible to make a complete transition from the imaginary order to the pure symbolic and thereby effectively pacify antagonisms and contradictions through an introduction of the Name of the Father.¹⁴ He argues in the same essay (though in a different context):

That peace [transacted with the father] . . . represents for [the child] his sole chance of one day becoming ‘a man like daddy,’ possessing ‘a woman like mommy,’ and being able to desire her and possess her not only unconsciously but consciously and publicly, either in marriage or in the freedom of a love relation, when the state of the society’s law allows it. I say that this strength can be quite *fragile* because if the Oedipus complex has not been negotiated sufficiently well, if *the peace (which in truth is never completely achieved)* has not been suitably realized in the child’s unconscious, *elements of contradiction subsist* in the child’s unconscious that then give rise to what Freud calls neurotic formations. (WP, 99-100; emphasis added)

¹⁴ Etienne Balibar argues that a major point of the confrontation between Althusser and Lacan was formed around the category of the “symbolic.” See Balibar, “Althusser’s Object,” *Social Text*, 39 (1994), pp. 168-69.

It would be interesting to juxtapose this passage with another from “Note on the ISAs.” Althusser writes:

There are several reasons for the fact that the unification of the ruling ideology is always ‘incomplete’ and always ‘has to be resumed’ . . . Just as the class struggle never ceases, so too the struggle of the ruling class for the uniformity of the existing ideological elements and forms never ceases. This means that the ruling ideology—even though it is its function—can never completely solve its own contradictions, which are a reflection of the class struggle.¹⁵

How can one miss that such an argument of Althusser’s is in fact quite similar to Žižek’s claim of “the inconsistent Other of jouissance”? For, as we can see, Althusser too claims that the ruling ideology is always “incomplete.” What Althusser has is, of course, class struggle instead of jouissance. However, it is also true that, for Žižek, as long as ideology is at stake, the real implies above all social antagonisms (the two most often mentioned examples being class antagonism and sexual antagonism). Is it then too wild an idea that, at least on this point, Žižek shares more with Althusser than with Lacan?

In the next section, we will return to the question of commodity and examine how Lacan’s approach to that question fits the overall picture of the two levels of the graph that we have just outlined.

Lacan’s Double Battlefront in the 1957-58 Seminar:

Constructing the Graph of Desire

There are two major texts where Lacan discusses Marx’s theoretical formula of commodity from the first chapter of *Capital I*. They are *Seminar V: The Formation of the*

¹⁵ Althusser, “Extracts from Althusser’s Note on the ISAs,” in Mike Gane, “On the ISAs episode,” *Economy and Society*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1983), p. 456; Althusser, “Notes sur les AIE,” in *Sur la reproduction* (Paris: PUF, 1995), pp. 254-55.

Unconscious (1957-58), and *Seminar XVI: From an Other to the other* (1968-69).

Although Žižek somewhat recklessly blends together the argumentations from the two seminars in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, there is an unmistakable difference in tone between them. Paying tribute to Marx's formula at a certain level, Lacan nevertheless maintains a critical attitude toward it in the earlier seminar; whereas, in the later one, he exalts Marx as the original inventor of the notion of symptom, linking Marx's idea of surplus value to his own idea of surplus jouissance. It is also in the same *Seminar XVI* that Lacan makes an explicit criticism of Althusser. The name of Althusser, on the other hand, does not appear anywhere in *Seminar V*. Nor can we find any implicit criticism that we can specifically relate to him. It is important to note that Lacan's criticism in this seminar targets Marx and Marxism in general, and not Althusser in particular.

It is true that, as Elizabeth Roudinesco says in her biography *Jacques Lacan*,¹⁶ both Althusser and Lacan were aware of each other's existence well before 1957. After attending Lacan's talk given at the *École normale supérieure* (ENS) in 1945 on the topic of the origin of madness, Althusser not only complained about "Lacan's convoluted style" but turned down "his idea of a cogito that included madness"; according to Roudinesco, Lacan heard about this later through their shared acquaintance and kept it in mind for a long time. But this brief encounter was all there was. Their first significant contact did not occur until Lacan sent Althusser a letter in July 1963. It was right after he read Althusser's article "Philosophy and the Human Science" in which he was recognized as a

¹⁶ E. Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. B. Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 296 ff.

key contemporary psychoanalyst who properly understood and unconcealed the essence of Freud's rejection of *Homo psychologicus*, which paralleled Marx's denunciation of *Homo æconomicus*.¹⁷

Even then, however, Althusser was not famous; he did not yet have any significant works published as Lacan already did. He acquired his fame only after *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital* came out in 1965. Naturally or not, Lacan was more interested in Althusser's students than in Althusser himself. The real reason why Lacan contacted Althusser was that he was in a desperate situation, having just been expelled from the Sainte-Anne hospital as well as from the *Société Française de Psychanalyse* (SFP); he was searching for a new lecture place and new members of the school he was going to found soon (*École freudienne de Paris*: EFP). It was rather Althusser who was theoretically interested in Lacan, and thus replied to him with long letters containing his theoretical thoughts and visions about the future alliance he wanted to draw between them. As a result of this contact, Lacan was able to begin to teach in the ENS and even received some of Althusser's students as his own among whom we find his future son-in-law and successor, Jacques-Alain Miller. Even after this historical meeting, however, Lacan was not really interested in Althusser's project to fundamentally renovate Marxism. In other words, Althusser was for him just one of the Marxists who happened to be able to offer some practical helps, and therefore should be dealt with at such a level.

¹⁷ Althusser, "Philosophie et sciences humaines," *Solitude de Machiavel*, ed. Yves Sintomer (Paris: PUF, 1998): 43-58. Also see Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, eds. by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, trans. Richard Veasey (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 186.

It is unlikely, then, that Lacan particularly had Althusser in mind when he made a criticism of Marxism in the 1957-58 seminar. By mixing up the different contexts of the two seminars which took place more than ten years apart, Žižek not only renders Lacan's later criticism of Althusser incomprehensible; he also disfigures his earlier criticism of Marxism in general by superimposing upon it the debate on ideology (or "discourse") which we know for sure did not happen until much later. We will discuss *Seminar XVI* in chapter 3. But, for now, let us focus on *Seminar V*. Reading this seminar, we learn Lacan's real intention behind the construction of the upper level of the graph of desire, because it is also the very first text in which he develops the graph itself.

Weaving together a couple of different themes such as joke or witticism (*Witz*), the distinction and relation between metonymy and metaphor, and the formation of the unconscious, Lacan makes his theoretical interventions in two different battlegrounds: One with Marxism and one with Melanie Klein (or the Kleinian school). The respective weights given to the two battlefronts are not symmetrical, however. Much more important is the debate with Klein. The debate with Marxism appears to be secondary; it can be better understood when viewed against the background of the other debate. Hence, I will first go over the issues with Klein, and then return to those with Marxism.

Let us begin by describing the state of the psychoanalytic movements in which Lacan found himself in the 1950s. It was a bloody battlefield in which two or more radically opposed branches of mainstream psychoanalysis were constantly combating one another. This was largely a result of what is known as the "controversial discussions"

which broke out between Anna Freud's school and Melanie Klein's in 1941, and lasted as long as for five years. The controversial discussions began apparently because Anna Freud, trying to escape with her father from Vienna which was then under the rule of the Nazi Germany, moved to London where her rival theorist, Klein, was active as a theoretical leader yielding strong influences over many British psychoanalysts. The final outcome of the long heated debates was far from satisfying to either group; the British Psychoanalytical Society (BPS) could do nothing more than to officially admit the presence of the three groups within the organization: Anna Freud's, Klein's, and the "Middle Group" (to which analysts with the background of "object-relations theory" belonged including Donald Winnicott).¹⁸ Roudinesco describes their issue as follows:

[T]he arguments were about the appraisal of Klein's theories, but soon, as Winnicott points out, debate centered on the training of analysts. Anna Freud's party saw the object of analysis as the undoing of the repression and the reduction of defense mechanisms, in order to give the ego better control over the id. Transference should not be analyzed until the defenses have been reduced. This training technique corresponded to the interpretation of the second topography put forward by ego psychology. . . . But for the Kleinians treatment began with recognition of the primary of the transferential bond and the necessity of analyzing it from the outset, regardless of any control the ego might have over the id.¹⁹

Hence, Anna Freud's position is that the psychoanalyst should view the patient's initial negative or aggressive reaction towards her, not as a transference, but as a defense of the ego which she must disarm first in order to eventually bring about a genuine positive transferential situation in which the patient may successfully identify himself

¹⁸ Cf. Evans, "Object-relations theory (théorie du relation d'objet)," *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 123-24.

¹⁹ Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, p. 193.

with her and thus gain a stronger control over his own id. Since in this approach strengthening the patient's ego constitutes an indispensable preliminary step toward any possible analytic work, Anna Freud is considered the originator of the school known as the "ego psychology" today, which is still very strong in the US. Klein, on the other hand, wants to consider transference strictly as the object of analysis, an object that should be analyzed rather than used for an educational purpose, for instance. Therefore, the patient's negative reaction as well as positive is not to be dismissed as an unnecessary aggression, but interpreted as a transference phenomenon that might lead to the hidden secret of the ambivalent relationship he has with his primary love objects.

This radical difference concerning the question of transference, however, goes back to the much earlier debate in the late 1920s in which the burgeoning psychoanalysis of children was at issue. The positions that the two theorists took were pretty much the same except that they were more visibly related to their different understandings of the *superego*, especially *the time of its formation*. Klein's renovation, as is well known, consists in the discovery of the new technique called "play technique"; in order to gain access to children's unconscious, it uses various toys that can serve as symbols. Because children of early ages lack proper language skills, the analyst cannot treat them using the traditional technique called free association. Klein, by proposing to analyze the "symbolism" of children's interactions with toys, effectively pioneers into a virgin territory of which psychoanalysis has long been kept out. Yet this new technique is also to imply that children's psyche develops at the early ages of one to three, to such an

extent that psychoanalytic interpretations for adults are more or less similarly applicable to it. In order that children's reactions to certain types of toy-playing should be psychoanalytically meaningful and thus interpreted as "transferences," there should be assumed an early formation of the superego in their psyche. This is why in her article "Symposium on Child Analysis" (1927), Klein says: "It is certain that the ego of children is not comparable to that of adults. The superego, on the other hand, approximates closely to that of the adult and is not radically influenced by later development as is the ego."²⁰

In her "Four Lectures on Child Analysis" (1927),²¹ Anna Freud refuses this position and insists on her father's idea drawn upon an interpretation of the second topography that the superego is only formed as a result of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex which is normally achieved at the ages of three to five. Klein, in response, proposes to shift the Oedipus complex as well to a much earlier period in her article "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict" (1928). She claims that the "sense of guilt associated with pregenital fixation" that children experience as early as at the end of the first year is the direct effect of the "introjection of the Oedipus love-objects".²² Alex Holder nicely sums up the point of controversy as follows:

What Klein here calls the "superego in the true sense" must be her postulated early superego . . . [S]he plainly distinguishes between the earliest, primitive identifications that contribute to superego formation, on the one hand, and, on the

²⁰ M. Klein, "Symposium on Child Analysis," *Love, Guilt and Reparation* (London: Hogarth, 1981), p. 154.

²¹ A. Freud, "Four Lectures on Child Analysis," *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth, 1974).

²² Klein, "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict," *The Selected Melanie Klein*, edit. by J. Mitchell, (New York: Free Press), p. 70.

other, later identifications that, at most, alter the self (the ego). Anna Freud, by contrast—like her father—assumes the existence of successive identifications with the primary objects, which persist for many years and lead to the setting up of the superego during the phallic phase only after the Oedipus complex has been overcome.²³

Anna Freud, therefore, considers the superego in the proper sense radically absent from the psyche of children younger than three. She maintains that what Klein mistakenly views as the early superego is nothing but an expression of the unstable and temporary relation that children form with external or not-yet sufficiently interiorized objects such as parents (original objects) or psychoanalysts (new objects). This is also why she thinks that the analyst can easily alter children's premature psyche by simply manipulating external settings and assisting it to adapt better to them. The analyst's job is to put himself in the place of children's superego and educate them from there (as Holder points out, thirty years later Anna Freud abandons this pedagogical approach and emphasizes the importance of analysis as the sole dimension of treatment).²⁴ Klein, of course, criticizes Anna Freud's method by pointing out that it not only covers over the real cause of children's neurosis by giving up the work of analysis that is due, but also sets parents in opposition to analysts, practically condemning the former as external objects that are simply not good enough ("that is why your children are sick and need new external objects such as ourselves, the analysts, etc.").

²³ A. Holder, *Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and the Psychoanalysis of Children and Adolescents*, trans. P. Slotkin (New York: Karnac, 2005), p. 87.

²⁴ Holder, *Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and the Psychoanalysis of Children and Adolescents*, pp. 82-83.

Lacan's intervention in this debate is carried out by the means of *the symbolic that arrives in advance* or what he calls in *Seminar V* "the primordial symbolization between the child and the mother" (*Sf V*, 180). It is this idea that allows him to take sides with Klein rather than with Anna Freud, while at the same time critically diagnosing where exactly the major difficulty of Klein's theory lies. The idea of primordial symbolization, in other words, is Lacan's double-edged sword: it rejects Anna Freud's position by approving Klein's ideas of the early superego and of the early stages of the Oedipus complex,²⁵ while proposing to reformulate them from the point of view of *the symbolic*, which for him is strictly related to language and not just to "symbols" or symbol-equivalents such as toys that still remain at the level of the imaginary. The major problem he identifies in Klein's theory is that it does not really take into account the symbolic dimension by focusing too much on the dual relation between the child and the mother, and trying to explain everything through a mechanism of imaginary projection. Let me cite here two relevant passages from *Seminar V*. The first one clearly shows Lacan's agreement with Klein on the question of the early arrival of the Oedipus complex:

This woman [Klein] who brings us profound views, so illuminating, not only on the pre-Oedipal period, but on children who she examines and analyzes at a stage presumed to be pre-Oedipal in a first approximation of the theory—this analyst who

²⁵ On this issue, my opinion differs from D. Evans's when he says that "Lacan disagrees with Klein on the early development of the Oedipus complex . . . since it is not primarily a stage of development but a permanent structure of subjectivity," and since he further "argues that there is [a pre-Oedipal phase]" (*An Introductory Dictionary*, p. 93). Although it is true that for him the Oedipus complex is a structure, and there is a pre-Oedipal phase, too, nevertheless Lacan clearly distinguishes the *two different structures* of the Oedipus complex in *Seminar V*: the imaginary triangle (or ternate) and the symbolic one of the Oedipus complex (see *Sf V*, 180 ff). He also affirms the existence of the "infantile feminine superego," which is more archaic than the masculine one (*Sf V*, 462).

forcefully approaches these children of themes sometimes in pre-verbal terms, almost at the moment that speech appears—well, the more she delves into the supposedly pre-Oedipal time of the history, and the more she looks in there, the more she sees there, always and all the time, permanent, the Oedipal question. (*Sf V*, 164)

In the following second passage, however, Lacan decisively diverges from Klein, claiming that her theory is still confined in the imaginary plane:

This is essential. . . . [B]y formulating it simply in terms of the confrontation of the child with the maternal personage, she [Klein] ends up in *a speculative relation in mirror*. From this fact, it follows that the maternal body . . . becomes the enclosure and the dwelling place of what can be localized, by projection, of the child's drives, these drives being themselves motivated by the aggression due to a fundamental deception. In the last resort, nothing in this dialectic makes us depart from *a mechanism of illusory projection* . . . In order to complete the Kleinian dialectic, it is necessary to introduce this notion: that the exterior for the subject is above all given, not as something projected from the interior of the subject, from its drives, but as the place where *the desire of the Other* is situated, and where the subject has to encounter it. (*Sf V*, 271-72; emphasis added)

Here, the Other whose desire Lacan argues the subject must encounter is not an imaginary other, but the symbolic Other whose place is for the time being occupied by the mother *qua* “a speaking being” (*Sf V*, 393). Lacan's claim is that, without this dimension of the desire of the Other, one would not be able to explain how it becomes possible for the subject to eventually escape from the vicious circle of projecting the drives into maternal part objects and then cannibalistically re-incorporating them in the form of bad objects, which are yet again required to be projected to the outside, etc.; it would rather seem to be a miracle for a child to come out of this Kleinian hell as “normal”.

In order to illustrate how the eventual departure from the Kleinian vicious circle is possible, Lacan distinguishes two different levels at which the child's demand to the mother operates: The level of need and that of desire. The child's or rather the infant's demand, at first, naturally starts out as a simple demand for a satisfaction of its biological need (such as the need to be fed or the need to be in a right temperature). The infant cries out when it has a demand; the mother takes up this demand and does something in response. If it is satisfied, the infant will stop crying and go back to its original state of calmness. If not, however, the infant will continue to cry until its demand is satisfied or until it is simply too exhausted. We can see that this crying of the infant already operates as a sort of signifier that should be interpreted by the mother. Insofar as it operates as a signifier, we also see there opens up a gap between the subject's demand and the mother's response.

What Klein calls "bad objects" result from the frustrations that the infant may experience with respect to its needs; the infant is frustrated because, for example, some breasts do not produce enough milk. And yet, what Klein further discovers is the fact that over the course of development the infant's demand tends to grow more and more insatiable. Even when it is fed enough, the infant will not stop crying. This unappeasable hunger leads the infant to enter what Klein calls, after her mentor, Karl Abraham, the second phase of the oral period in which it starts to attack the mother by sadistically biting her nipple. It is essential, however, to notice that, in her theory, frustration is thought of in terms of needs or, at most, of innate drives that the infant is born with.

By contrast, Lacan suggests that such a frustration should be theorized at the level of the signifier. The infant is frustrated, not because there are things like bad breasts that do not catch up with its demand (whether the fault should fall on the side of the poor breasts or on the side of the greedy infant), but because there is an abysmal gap that separates the demand as a signifier and the Other's interpretation of it. This gap cannot be closed in principle because it is not simply caused by a temporary miscommunication for which the infant's future acquisition of proper language skills would make up a sufficient solution. What constitutes the fundamental deadlock for the infant is the dimension of *the desire of the Other*. It is because the mOther desires *qua* subject, and because the infant desires the very desire of the mOther which mutates frequently, that the infant is bound up to feel frustrated.

Over the initial horizon of the demand as need thus emerges its beyond, namely the horizon of the demand as *desire*. It is this excess that will eventually come into full play when the child begins to engage itself in what is known as the *Fort-Da* game in which the presence and the absence of the mOther is "primordially" symbolized. The child obsessively asks: Why is the mother away, for example, talking on the phone with somebody else, while she should be here with me, feeding me, playing with me, etc.?; why does she desire something other than myself, something other than what I offer her?; what on earth can be this object of her desire that I myself should become?; in short, what is the *meaning* of all this, of all this signifying chain, in which her presence and absence alternate in an arbitrary way? As we shall see later, this is what constitutes the first time

of “the three times of the Oedipus complex”: Frustration. The symbolic that arrives in advance functions here underneath the surface of the apparently imaginary dual relation between the child and the mother.

In order to distinguish this “first symbolization” from the later symbolization, Lacan borrows terminologies from Roman Jakobson, and introduces two fundamentally distinct modes in which language operates: metonymy and metaphor.²⁶ Metonymy corresponds to what Freud in his *Interpretation of Dream* calls “displacement,” while metaphor “condensation.” Lacan prefers to characterize them as “combination” and “substitution”. Metonymy designates the diachronic combinatory axis of the signifying chain. If I hear somebody say, “I am hungry,” I immediately start to link the signifiers: “I”, “am”, and “hungry,” and try to understand the meaning of the whole sentence. But this can be done only in a retroactive manner. The first signifier “I,” when I hear it, is just pronounced like “eye”, leaving me unable to determine its meaning (signified); thus I wait for other signifiers to arrive. But even after hearing the first two signifiers, “I am,” I still cannot determine whether they signify “I exist” or whether there will follow some other signifier(s) and turn them into, for example, “I am hungry.” It is only when I come to the final period that I can work on the entire sentence backward, and carve up the signified of each signifier. Lacan gives us a formula to express this metonymical dimension of language:

²⁶ Jakobson’s own discussion can be found in Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska & Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 95-114.

$$f(S \dots S') S \equiv S (\text{---}) s.$$

Here, the “ $f(S \dots S')$ ” on the left side of the equation denotes the function of signification, while the $S \dots S'$ indicates that all the signifiers in the chain from S to S' are combined together in such a way to produce the effect of signification which is represented by the $S (\text{---}) s$ on the right side. The S and the s respectively standing for the signifier and the signified are separated by the bar placed in-between. This bar is the same bar as we can find in the Saussurean formula of the sign, s/S , though the Lacanian formula rather turns it upside down and becomes S/s , thereby emphasizing the primacy of the signifier over the signified (cf. “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” *EC*, 428-429). The important thing to notice here, though, is that the metonymy of the signifiers does produce a signified, a meaning.

It is, then, not entirely correct to say that metonymy lacks any kind of quilting point (*point de caption*) and thus produces no meaning at all. A period at the end of a sentence, for instance, is what works as *a horizontal or diachronic quilting point* by means of which the meaning of the signifying chain is fixated.²⁷ The problem, of course, is that, even if the chain of the signifiers is quilted to a signified, there nevertheless lingers a possibility that this quilting point itself may be undone when another chain of signifiers eventually arrives. Let us assume that the sentence “I am hungry” is followed by another phrase, “hungry for knowledge!” This phrase considerably alters the meaning of the original sentence and forces it to imply, “I want to learn” instead of “I want to eat.”

²⁷ Evans proposes two distinct kinds of quilting point that correspond to metonymy and metaphor: the diachronic one and the synchronic one (*An Introductory Dictionary*, p. 149).

Hence, the horizontal quilting point is not as stable as it might seem at first. This is why Lacan defines the sense generated by metonymy as “*peu-de-sens*”: “Let us call it today simply the *peu-de-sens*. Once you have this key, the signification of the metonymical chain will not fail to appear clear to you” (*Sf* V, 97). That is to say, a metonymical combination of the signifiers, at most, makes “little-sense,” if not non-sense.²⁸

Let us return for a moment to the aforementioned primordial symbolization between the child and the mother. The child is frustrated because it cannot grasp the desire of the mOther in a conclusive manner. Of course, for a while, it is preoccupied by the luring idea that it might just be able to do so, for example, by throwing up milk, and thus causing the mother to turn round, hang up the phone, and run to him to take care of the mess it just created. The child goes, “Ah! Once again, I *am* the true meaning of her desire”; nevertheless, it is relieved only to be frustrated again when she goes away next time to do something else such as chatting with the father, reading a book, cleaning the house, etc. In this way, the child is alienated by the unending metonymical sliding of the desire of the mOther. It would take a life time to wait for this sliding to end; in other words, the child would be only proffered in the end what Lacan calls the “death that life brings”. Due to the whim of the Other, all the attempts of the child’s to make sense out of the situation ultimately fail, generating only “little-sense” which works merely as a lure

²⁸ In fact, this is what Žižek wants to indicate by the non-sensical dimension of the “interpellation without identification/subjectivation.”

for its interminable chase.²⁹ The child, therefore, is not yet a subject, insofar as this term is supposed to carry within it a certain sense of autonomy; it is only an “a-subject” (*assujet*) radically deprived of a power to master its own situation, namely its relation with the mother:

In this measure, the child who constituted its mother *as subject*, on the basis of the *first symbolization*, finds itself entirely submitted to what we can call, but only by way of anticipation, “the law” . . . The law of the mother is, of course, the fact that the mother is a speaking being and this suffices to legitimate my saying *the law of the mother*. Nevertheless, this law is, if I may say so, an uncontrolled law. . . . [T]his law is entirely in the subject who supports it, namely in the good or bad will of the mother, the good or bad mother. . . . The subject outlines itself as *a-subject*; it is an a-subject because it first experiences and senses itself as profoundly subjected [*assujetti*] to the caprice of the one it depends on, even if this caprice is an articulated caprice. (*Sf V*, 188-89; emphasis added)

Let us remind ourselves that Lacan’s account given in this passage also corresponds to the first level of the graph of desire. Thus we see him right away introduce the graph (see Fig. 3) which looks exactly like the first graph called the “elementary cell.”

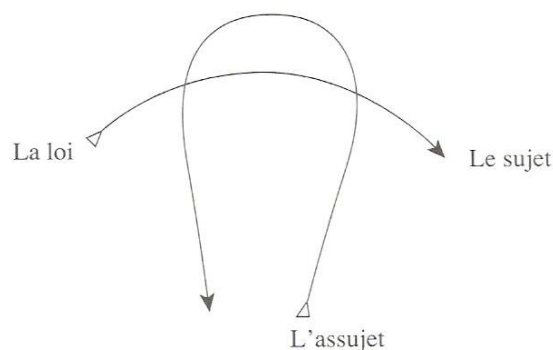


Fig. 3. *La Loi, le sujet, l'assujet* (*Sf V*, 189)

²⁹ It is perhaps in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* that we may find one of the best literary representations of such a metonymical frustration: “Accursèd be that tongue that tells me so, / For it hath cowed my better part of man. / And be these juggling fiends no more believed, / That palter with us in a double sense, / That keep the word of promise to our ear / And break it to our hope. I’ll not fight with thee.” (Act 5 Scene viii).

This graph should be read in this way: Insofar as the mOther *qua* the signifying chain (a speaking being) is also the subject *qua* a desiring being (*Le sujet*), the law of the mother (*La loi*) is an arbitrary law which makes out of the child only the a-subject (*L'assujet*) profoundly alienated in language.

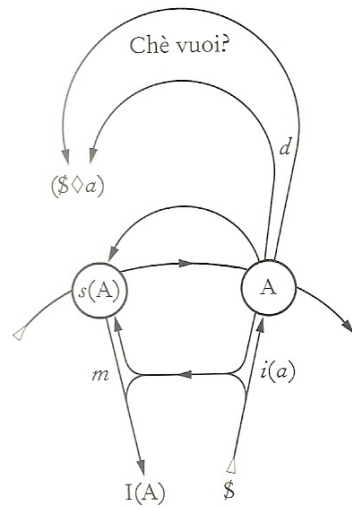


Fig. 4. *Chè vuoi?* (EC, 690)

Therefore, we see the frustration of the subject by the arbitrary maternal law, as it already starts at the lower level of the graph, will culminate in the subject's outcry, "*Chè vuoi?*" (What do you want?). This corresponds to Lacan's intention behind the third graph of desire (see Fig. 4). The small *d* we see on the upper right side represents the *desire* of the mother, in the face of which the subject is frustrated and led to ask "*Chè vuoi?*" while being eventually captured in the formula of fantasy: $S \infty a$.

This frustration of the subject can possibly be overcome only when another essential dimension of language, namely *metaphor*, intervenes. In contrast to metonymy, metaphor

characterizes the synchronic substitutive axis of the signifying chain in which one signifier is replaced by another. This is a fundamental operation that produces the effect of *vertical or synchronic quilting point* by means of which the indefinite metonymical sliding of the signifying chain is finally stabilized.³⁰ Lacan's formula for metaphor reads:

$$f(S'/S) S \equiv S (+) s$$

The signifying function of the signifier *S* being substituted for by another signifier *S'*, is equivalent to what the *S (+) s* on the right side of the equation indicates, namely that the signifier *S* sinks under the bar to the nether region of the signified, producing a new signified *s*. The + sign placed between *S* and *s* does not stand for "plus," but for the "crossing of the bar," a "poetic or creative crossing" through which the subject in its proper sense at last comes about: "This crossing expresses the condition for the passage of the signifier into the signified, whose moment I pointed out above by provisionally conflating it with *the place of the subject*" (*EC*, 429; emphasis added).

Let us pay immediate attention to the fact that this is also the same crossing as the one called "the crossing of the fundamental fantasy by the subject." We saw above how the fantasy was shaped by the metonymical movement of the signifying chain. The subject, through the formation of a metaphor, crosses the fantasy precisely by forcing the master signifier itself to cross the bar into the nether region of the signified. This crossing, however, does not really mark the moment at which the subject goes beyond the

³⁰ For this reason, metaphor does not take place *prior to* metonymy. Making an analogy between metonymy and metaphor on the one hand, and on the other the preparation of joke and the punch line, Lacan maintains that metonymy is a necessary preparation for metaphor: "metonymy is the fundamental structure within which this something new and creative which is metaphor can be produced" (*Sf V*, 75).

symbolic into the realm of the real, as is more or less mistakenly viewed by many Lacanian scholars, especially Žižek; it rather marks the moment of the subject's *entrance* into the symbolic order proper, because, while metonymy belongs to the order of the mother, metaphor fundamentally belongs to the order of the father. The Name-of-the-Father is the paternal metaphor which intervenes as the "pure symbolic principle" (*Sf* V, 227) by substituting itself for the desire of the Mother, which is the master signifier.

Lacan's second formula of metaphor, " $S / \$' \cdot \$' / x \rightarrow S (1 / s)$," which already appears in *Seminar V*, session IX, is repeated in "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," with the following explanation: "Here the capital Ss are signifiers, x is the unknown signification, and s is the signified induced by the metaphor, which consists in the substitution in the signifying chain of S for S'. The elision of S', represented in the formula by the fact that it is crossed out [i.e. $\$'$], is the condition of the metaphor's success" (*EC*, 465). Applying this formula to the relation between the desire of the Mother and the Name-of-the-Father, Lacan derives the following formula (*EC*, 465):

$$\frac{\text{Name} - \text{of} - \text{the} - \text{Father}}{\text{Mother's Desire}} \cdot \frac{\text{Mother's Desire}}{\text{Signified to the Subject}} \rightarrow \text{Name} - \text{of} - \text{the} - \text{Father} \left(\frac{A}{\text{Phallus}} \right)$$

We shall soon discuss what Lacan means by "Phallus" on the right side of this formula when we discuss the Oedipus complex. But, first, let us emphasize that this metaphorical effect is produced, not as the signified is substituted for by the signifier, but as one signifier is substituted for by another. This is why, in contrast to the "*peu-de-sens*" of metonymy, Lacan links the metaphorical generation of sense to the "*pas-de-sens*". The

“*pas-de-sens*” does not really mean “non-sense” (*Sf V*, 98), because it does produce sense or meaning. “Metaphor is a quite general function,” Lacan argues, “I would even say that it is by the possibility of substitution that the generation, if one may say so, of *the world of sense* is conceived” (*Sf V*, 31; emphasis added).

The “*pas-de-sens*” of metaphor rather consists in the fact that such a world of sense is engendered through a substitutive operation that occurs *at the level of phonemes* (the acoustic level of language that Lacan later in his life designates with a neologism: *lalangue*). Lacan takes the example of the word “*atterré*.” He points out that, although this term means “terrified” in French, nevertheless it originally has nothing to do with the signified “terrified.” The verb “*atterrir*” from which the adjective “*atterré*” is derived only means “to land,” “to arrive at the land from the sea.” It is through the operation of the homonymic phoneme “*ter*” of this verb that is shared by another term “*terreur*” (terror) that the term “*atterré*” gains the new signified “terrified,” condensing the two terms of completely different meanings and origins. Such a condensation is the same condensation we find in dream works as Freud shows it.

Joke or witticism is also formed through this kind of condensational mechanism of metaphor. This is why in *Seminar V* Lacan sets out his whole discussion of metonymy and metaphor around the question of joke, specifically referring to Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. One of the central examples that Freud uses in his book (chapter II) to illustrate the mechanism of joke is from Heinrich Heine’s *Reisebilder III* (Part II, chapter VIII). The joke is about the lottery-agent, Hirsch-Hyacinth, who

boasts of his relations with the wealthy Baron Rothschild, and says, “I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal—quite famillionairely.” As Freud explains it, the neologism “famillionairely” succinctly expresses such a long and complicated meaning as “Rothschild treated me quite as his equal, quite familiarly—that is, so far as a millionaire can. . . . A rich man’s condescension . . . always involves something not quite pleasant for whoever experiences it.”³¹ The rapid connection between *Familiär* and *Milionär* is achieved through the shared phonemes, “mili” and “är.” Freud describes this connection as a “condensation accompanied by the formation of a substitute.”³²

Yet, Freud in chapter V further excavates another meaning attached to the term “famillionairely” which addresses the issue of Heine’s own personal history. In this perspective, Hirsch-Hyacinth appears as a metonymical displacement of the name of Heinrich Heine himself. And behind the millionaire Salomon Rothschild, there hides another millionaire, namely Heine’s own uncle Salomon Heine, whose daughter he had a “burning wish” to marry, but could not, because, just like Baron Rothschild, Heine’s uncle always treated him “a little famillionairely.” This is why Heine takes “the greatest satisfaction” in making this joke, Freud says.³³ In other words, the *jouissance* that Heine successfully binds in the joke arises from the expulsion, to the nether region of the

³¹ S. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 14 ff.

³² Ibid., p. 19.

³³ Ibid., pp. 172-173.

signified, of the signifier, the name, Salomon Heine, whose owner, as Lacan adds in his own voice, “played the most oppressive role in [Heine’s] life” (*Sf* V, 54), i.e. the role of the master signifier.³⁴

Lacan’s whole seminar is devoted to explaining the process of the “formation of the unconscious” by utilizing this mechanism of witticism in which a metonymical combination of the signifiers leads to a metaphorical substitution.³⁵ There is, however, a missing piece of puzzle concerning the question of how exactly this transition becomes effected with regard to the psychic development of the child. Here is where Lacan introduces the “three times of the Oedipus complex”: Frustration, Privation, and Castration. We have already explained what frustration is, but only at an empirical level. The mother’s talking on the phone, chatting with the father, reading a book, etc., are so many examples of the mother pursuing the *phallus*, not the symbolic phallus (Φ), but the imaginary phallus (ϕ). The imaginary triangle of the Oedipus complex is thus formed, not really as the child-mother-father triangle, but as the child-mother- ϕ triangle. Apparently this is a correction that Lacan makes to the Kleinian idea of the early stages of the Oedipus complex. He argues: “The first relation to reality is described between the

³⁴ In this perspective, it is fascinating to read another example Lacan offers in his “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious.” It is Victor Hugo’s verse which runs: “His sheaf was neither miserly nor hateful.” Lacan argues that, once “his sheaf” substitutes the name “Booz,” Booz is “ejected into the outer darkness where miserliness and hatred harbor him in the hollow of their negation,” and thus unable to go back to his place. Lacan links this effect of metaphor to “paternity” and “fecundity” (*EC*, 422-23).

³⁵ This dimension of witticism is what Žižek apparently wants to designate by relating the symbolic structure of commodity fetishism to the “totalitarian laughter” (illustrated with his famous example of canned laughter). But joke for Lacan is not supposed to be effected at the metonymical level of the “totalitarian” law of the mOther, which only constitutes a preparation for it, but at the metaphorical level, in which its punch line is effectively introduced. The jouissance that one can derive from making a joke is related to the banishment of a certain “totalitarian” master signifier.

mother and the child, and it is here that the child experiences the first realities of his contact with the living environment. It is in order to objectively describe the situation that we [analysts] make the father enter the triangle, although he has *not entered for the child yet*” (*Sf V*, 180; emphasis added). This argument is what reiterates his previous statement that, according to Klein, “among the bad objects present in the body of the mother—all the rivals, the bodies of the brothers, of the sisters, past, present, and future—there is very precisely *the father represented in the form of his penis*” (*Sf V*, 165; emphasis added).

Hence Lacan presents us the schema (see Fig. 5), which is a variation of the Lacanian schema L.³⁶ In there we see two triangles: the triangle in perforated line E (Enfant) – M (Mère) – ϕ (the imaginary phallus) and the triangle in real line E – M – P (Père).

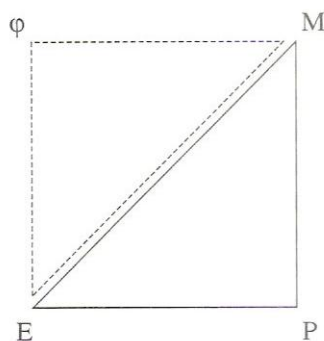


Fig. 5. Two Triangles (*Sf V*, 183)

As Lacan will later show by shifting this schema into another one, “the schema R” (*Sf V*, 226), the first triangle here depicts the imaginary triangle, while the second the

³⁶ According to Evans, it is called so because it looks like the capital Greek letter *lambda* (*An Introductory Dictionary*, p. 169).

symbolic one. The triangle of E-M- ϕ exhibits the structure of the first time of the Oedipus complex, frustration, in which the child is in pursuit of the desire of the mother who herself runs after the ever escaping imaginary phallus. At this stage, the child tries to master her desire by becoming the imaginary phallus that she seeks. Since it tries to *be* the phallus, it competes with everything that appears to it to be the object of the mother's desire. The aggressivity that the child shows in the imaginary stage originates from this game of rivalry whose motto Lacan formulates by modifying Hamlet's famous line: To be or not to be the phallus, that is the question!

The second time of the Oedipus complex, privation, begins when the child is threatened by the "fact" of castration. However, Lacan repeatedly points out that it is not the child, but the mother, who becomes castrated at this juncture. In fact, the parents' words that menace the child with castration ("If you keep on playing with it, I will have it cut off you!") do not lead to any real effect. A real effect is brought about only when the child witnesses, with its own eyes, the "privation" of the phallus manifested in the body of the mOther. Likening this moment to that of confronting the horrifying "head of Medusa," the symbol of the mother's sexual organ (*Sf V*, 384), Lacan argues:

The phallus is found always covered by the bar put upon its access to the signifying domain, namely upon its place in the Other. And it is by this that castration is introduced in the development. This is never . . . by the way of an interdiction on masturbation, for example. If you read the observation of the little Hans, you see that the first interdictions do not bring about any effect for him. . . . As the texts as well as the observations indicate, it is a matter of the being in the world which, on the real plane, would be presumed to have the least chance of being castrated, namely the mother [*il s'agit de l'être au monde qui, sur le plan réel, aurait le moins lieu de se présumer châtré, à savoir la mère*]. It is at this place that the castration is manifested in the Other and the desire of the Other is marked by the signifying bar

[*la barre signifiante*], and it is here, and essentially by this route, that—for both the man and the woman—the specific thing which functions as the castration complex is introduced. (*Sf V*, 348)

Hence, the child's discovery of the lack of the phallus in the mOther marks the moment when the Other is finally *barred*. This is indeed the same barred A [*Autre*] we can find at the upper left corner of the complete graph of desire. Lacan holds, however, that the mOther thus castrated or barred does not appear weakened to the child in any sense. On the contrary, she becomes *much stronger* precisely because she is castrated; she is now, without the phallus, turned into a black hole, the mouth that can devour the entire existence of the child (*Sf V*, 350). It is at this moment that the child seeks a help from the side of the father who *has* the phallus, not the imaginary one, but the symbolic one (Φ) this time. The child erects the phallus borrowed from the father like a pillar in the mother's open mouth in order to keep it from shutting.

This is what Lacan indicates as the third time of the Oedipus complex: Castration. By forcing the child to give up on its attempt to *be* the imaginary phallus, the father finally separates it from the tyrannical or whimsical law of the mother, thereby constituting it as the subject in the proper sense of the term. The aforementioned question of “to be or not to be the phallus” is replaced here by another question of “to have or not to have the phallus.” Insofar as having something does not necessarily exclude the possibility of sharing it with others, this new question steers clear of the rivalry that we come across in the child's imaginary game of presence and absence; thus the child can borrow the symbolic phallus from the father without necessarily destroying him.

Many Lacanian scholars including Žižek view the barred A (\bar{A}) as marking the moment when the subject finally discovers the lack in the Other or the inconsistency of the Other, and thus becomes able to *separate* itself from the symbolic law. The subject's own realization that "the Other does not have it" is supposed to dissolve the previous image of the almighty Other, giving the subject a chance to make a subversion. This interpretation, however, is doubly misleading. First, by failing to distinguish the two different symbolic Others, the Mother and the Father, it renders unintelligible Lacan's logic of the Oedipus complex. Second, it confuses the stage of frustration with that of privation. The inconsistency of the Other is in fact what is already manifested at the stage of frustration. It is precisely because the mOther changes her law arbitrarily by desiring something else that the child keeps on trying to be the very object that might fill her void. Put otherwise, such an inconsistency of the Other, which is nothing but the *peu-de-sens* Lacan talks about, is what functions as a *lure* for the subject's desire. The privation of the phallus that the subject encounters within the mOther is nothing of this kind. It rather constitutes the moment of anxiety when the things get *real*, when the subject is no longer able to indulge itself in the imaginary *Fort-Da* game with the mother.

From this angle it is interesting to observe that Bruce Fink in his *The Lacanian Subject* expresses a perplexed feeling toward one of the passages from Lacan's *Seminar X* on Anxiety. The passage he quotes from Lacan is this:

What provokes anxiety? Contrary to what people say, it is neither the rhythm nor the alternation of the mother's presence-absence. What proves this is that the child indulges in repeating presence-absence games: security of presence is found in the possibility of absence. What is most anxiety-producing for the child is when the

relationship through which he comes to be—on the basis of lack which makes him desire—is most perturbed: when there is no possibility of lack, when his mother is constantly on his back (December 5, 1962)³⁷

After quoting this passage, Fink argues:

This example fails to conform to Lacan's notion of separation, for the negatives here (the lacks) both apply to the same term: the mother, in other words, the Other. The mOther must show some sign of incompleteness, fallibility, or deficiency for separation to obtain and for the subject to come to be as \$; in other words, the mOther must demonstrate that she is a desiring (and thus also a lacking and alienated) subject, that she too has submitted to the splitting/barring action of language, in order for us to witness the subject's advent. The mother, in the above example from Seminar X, monopolizes the field: it is not clear whether she herself has come to be as a divided subject.³⁸

Now we can clearly see that Lacan in that quote is rather trying to set apart frustration and privation: Frustration is the stage in which the child indulges in the game of presence-absence with the mother, whereas privation is the stage in which the child, no longer being able to find an escape from the mother, is consumed by the fantasmatic image of its being on the verge of getting swallowed by her. What Lacan calls “no possibility of lack” characterizes the situation in which the child is already in the closing mouth of the mOther, desperately searching for an aid from a third party. By conflating the two stages, and focusing solely on the logic of frustration, Fink mistakenly argues that Lacan's account of “the mother monopolizing the field” does not conform to his own logic of “separation.” Lacan's argument, however, can be properly understood only when it is combined with another, namely that the castrated mother does not grow weaker but

³⁷ Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre X: L'angoisse*, éd. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), p. 67 (quoted in Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* [New Jersey: Princeton, 1995], p. 53).

³⁸ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, pp. 53-54.

conversely much stronger. It is because the castrated mOther monopolizes the entire field of subjectivity that the subject cannot help but to call for the father's help and thus enter the next stage of the Oedipus complex which is properly called castration.

After describing the dilemma in which a female child finds herself as she witnesses her castrated mother, Lacan argues:

You should not believe that for man the situation is better. It is even more comic. He, the poor unfortunate, has the phallus [the penis], and *it is in fact knowing that his mother does not have it which traumatizes him—because, then, as she is much stronger, where are we going to end up? It is in this primitive fear of women that Karen Horney showed one of the most essential sources of the disturbances of the castration complex* [to consist]. . . . [I]n the last analysis he will resolve the question of the danger which threatens what he effectively has, by what we know well, namely *a pure and simple identification with the one who has its insignia* [i.e. the phallus], *with the one who to all appearances has escaped the danger, namely the father.* (Sf V, 350-51; emphasis added).

Hence, it can be said that one of the major problems in both Žižek's and Fink's accounts is found in their confusion between frustration and privation, which in turn is closely related to their problematic interpretation which views separation as the separation *from the symbolic as such*.³⁹ The Lacanian separation, however, operates unequivocally by discriminating the two symbolic orders, the metonymical symbolic that arrives in advance (the Mother's desire) and the metaphorical pure symbolic (the Name-of-the-Father). The symbolic phallus proffered by the father cannot be negated, because

³⁹ We can locate Žižek's mistake of the same kind in this passage: "So it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of 'de-alienation' called by Lacan *separation*: not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated for ever from the object by the barrier of language, but that the object is separated from the Other itself, that the Other itself 'hasn't got it', hasn't got the final answer—that is to say, is itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other. *This lack in the Other gives the subject—so to speak—a breathing space . . .*" (SOI, 122; emphasis added).

without it there would be no possibility of a separation of the subject from the law of the mOther.

Does this mean that the paternal law is some sort of super law that governs over the maternal law? In other words, is it the law that can provide the subject with the long-awaited ground of full consistency that the maternal law lacks? Lorenzo Chiesa in his *Subjectivity and Otherness* points out that in early seminars such as *Seminar V* Lacan still maintains the idea that there is the Other of the Other.⁴⁰ It is true that Lacan in this seminar repeatedly uses the expression “the Other of the Other.” And yet, it seems that he does so only to indicate that there is a dimension beyond the primordial relationship between the child and the mOther. Though he does not expressly say in this seminar that “there is no Other of the Other,” Lacan nevertheless insists that “there is no meta-language” (*Sf V*, 74), which is exactly what is meant by that aphoristic expression (see *EC*, 688). The Father’s word that is situated beyond the mOther’s cannot be considered a “super-word.” Lacan says:

You have quite correctly the right . . . to think that everything is not reduced to this sort of grading of the word, and I think that this sort of mistake must have left you unsatisfied also at the moment when I explained it to you. . . . In effect, beyond the word and beyond the super-word, beyond the law of the father, whatever fashion one denotes it, something else is well required. It is for this that, naturally at the same level at which this [paternal] law is situated, there is introduced precisely this elective signifier, namely the phallus. In normal conditions, it is placed at a second degree of the encounter with the Other. This is what, in my little formulae, I called $S(\bar{A})$, the signifier of the barred A. (*Sf V*, 367)

⁴⁰ L. Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007).

Hence, the reason why the paternal law is not a super-law or a super-word is because, as Lacan himself says several lines down, it is “integrated” with the castration complex that revolves around the “elective signifier phallus.” It is through the castration complex that there is introduced a qualitative, and not just quantitative, difference between the maternal law and the paternal law. Far from being all possessive and omnipresent/omnipotent like the law of the mother, the law of the father prohibits only one thing (ϕ),⁴¹ and thereby allows the subject to do *everything else*. Such a qualitative difference between the two laws is indeed the conclusion that Lacan reaches during the last session of seminar by taking issues with the atheist position of Ivan from Dostoyevski’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, whose line runs: “If God does not exist, then everything is permitted” (*Sf V*, 496). Lacan counters this position by postulating that “*if God is dead, nothing is permitted any longer*” (ibid., Lacan’s emphasis). It is the function of the paternal law, then, that allows rather than disallows the subject to do things on its own; for this reason the moment of the symbolic castration coincides with the moment of subjectivation, the moment of the institution of a *certain* kind of autonomy of the subject.

Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that Lacan’s entire effort in *Seminar V* is directed toward locating in a distinctive fashion the symbolic that arrives in advance (the primordial or first symbolization) and the symbolic proper (the pure symbolic principle). Lacan’s major criticism of Klein is that she ignores the dimension of *desire*, confining

⁴¹ This prohibition, of course, is implied by a homonym of *le nom-du-père*: *le non-du-père* (the No-of-the-Father).

her understanding of demand merely at the level of *need*. Whether it pertains to biological functions or to innate drives, need remains something to be satisfied. Desire, on the other hand, is something that cannot ultimately be satisfied; it designates the abysmal gap between the two desires constantly missing each other (i.e. the subject's and the Other's). Hence, what is important is to learn *how to enjoy the desiring itself*, the dissatisfaction itself of *jouissance*. A plausible way to do so, at least at this stage of development of Lacan's thought, is found only when the dimension of the symbolic is clearly brought up. *Desire must always be thought of in terms of the symbolic triadic relation*. By reinstating the emphasis put on the father's role by Freud, and by reformulating Klein's idea of the early stages of the Oedipus complex as the symbolic that arrives in advance, Lacan not only introduces the symbolic dimension profoundly lacking in psychoanalytic theories at that time (Klein's as well as others' such as Winnicott's: see *Sf V*, 461), but also eventually formulates a proper, non-destructive, way to achieve the lasting dynamics of the enjoyment of desire or desiring which is supported by the symbolic law, the Name-of-the-Father.

It is from this point of view that we can now approach another debate Lacan carries out in this seminar, i.e. the debate with Marxism. Praising Marx as "a precursor of the mirror stage" (*Sf V*, 81), Lacan points out that, in his theory of commodity, no quantitative relations of value can be installed before "an equivalence in general" is established. In other words, it is not a question of establishing equality between many measures of the same kind of goods (for instance, apples). It is rather a question of

comparing different kinds of goods (apples and oranges). Such a comparison of goods that are totally heterogeneous *qua* use values can only be achieved at the level of the signifier at which everything becomes a signifier of the value of everything else. Lacan refers this Marxian idea of general equivalence of value to the effect of *metonymy*:

If the indications that I gave you the last time on the metonymical function aimed at something, it is what, in the simple unfolding of the signifying chain, is produced from equalization, leveling, and equivalence. It is an effacement or a reduction of sense, but this is not to say that it is non-sense. Apropos of this, I took the Marxist reference – to put in function two objects of need in such a way that one becomes the measure of the value of the other, to efface from the object what is precisely the order of need, and, out of this fact, introduce it into the order of value. From the point of view of sense, this can be called by a sort of neologism which also presents an ambiguity, the *dé-sens*. Let us call it today simply the *peu-de-sens*. Once you have this key, the signification of the metonymical chain will not fail to appear clear to you. (*Sf V*, 97)

From Lacan's point of view, it is not a problem but rather a merit that Marx formulates commodity at the level of the signifier, at the level of metonymy. A problem arises, however, when Marx tries to overcome the capitalist commodity relationship by assuming an existence of some sort of "natural metaphor" which can bring back together again the two different levels of demand, namely need and desire. In other words, he idealistically believes that such a "natural metaphor," once it is discovered, can put an end to the *peu-de-sens* of the metonymical commodity relationship, and reproduce, at a higher level, "the ancient satisfaction," the "first pleasure of the satisfied demand" (*Sf V*, 96) for all individuals. Lacan's point is that, as long as the *peu-de-sens* expresses the irreducible gap between the desire of the subject and that of the Other (other people in this case), it cannot be removed in an absolute fashion. There will always remain

something missing, something that is not satisfied. In fact, this missing element, this missing signifier (for example, the ϕ) is what constitutes the condition of possibility of everyone's enjoying the desiring itself. In this perspective, Marx's idea of communism is a myth insofar as it alleges it can close the gap between various individual desires in discrepancy, and thus bring everyone a satisfaction. By creating a "natural metaphor," which is contradictory in terms, Marx tries to simultaneously catch two rabbits running in opposite directions: need and desire. Lacan argues that Lenin's famous dictum falls into a similar trap: "Socialism is probably a very attractive thing, but the perfect community has electrification as well" (*Sf V*, 91).⁴² Although he tries to go beyond the order of need by "creating desire other than need," Lenin nevertheless ends up conflating, again, the two levels of need and desire by defining desire as "the signifier plus need" (socialism plus electrification) (*ibid.*). Lacan here is proposing, then, to completely divorce the two levels, and conceptualize desire solely at the level of the signifier.

After a long journey of explaining the winding development of the dialectic of desire, Lacan in session XXVI revisits the issue of Marxism, and argues:

We arrive thus at ideal society. What I describe is something that is dreamt of by utopians from time immemorial, namely a society functioning perfectly, one resulting in the satisfaction of each according to his need. I add, to tell the truth, that all participate here according to their merits, and it is here that the problem begins. (*Sf V*, 461)

⁴² However, Lacan's citation here is not entirely correct. What Lenin actually says in Part II of *Eighth All-Russia Congress of Soviets* (29 December 1920) is: "Communism is *Soviet power* plus electrification of the whole country" (<http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/8thcong/index.htm>; emphasis added).

The two utopian catchphrases, “each according to one’s merit” and “each according to one’s need,” are well known phrases taken out of Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. The former principle characterizes “socialism” as the initial form of the Marxist society, while the latter characterizes “communism” as its final form. Lacan criticizes Marx’s regression to the level of need, or rather his conflating the level of the signifier (desire) with that of need:

In sum, this schema [of each according to his need], if it remains at the level of *the intersection of the signifier and the pressure or tendency of need*, what does it result in? It results in the identification of the subject to the Other, insofar as the Other articulates the distribution of resources that can respond to *need*. This is unlikely, for the simple reason that it is necessary to take into account the background of the demand, if only to explain the articulation of the subject *in an order which exists beyond the order of the real, and which we call the symbolic order*, which complicates the former, which is superimposed upon it, and which does not adhere to it [*Il n’en est pas ainsi, du seul fait qu’il est nécessaire de faire entrer en ligne de compte l’arrière-plan de la demande, ne serait-ce que pour rendre compte de l’articulation du sujet dans un ordre qui existe au-delà de l’ordre du réel, et que nous appelons l’ordre symbolique, qui le complique, qui s’y superpose, qui n’y adhère*]. (Sf V, 461; emphasis added)

It is here that we can plainly see where Lacan’s disagreement with Marxism lies. From Lacan’s standpoint, Marx overlooks, *not* the order of the real, *but* the order of the symbolic. Though in a different context, Marx makes the same mistake as Klein does. This is why Lacan in this seminar engages in a double battlefield, twining the two critiques into one thread. The whole construction of the upper level of the graph of desire aims at bringing into relief and carefully delineating the symbolic dimension which in principle should not be mixed up with the imaginary or the real.

As I already mentioned in the beginning of this section, Lacan's criticism of Marxism, however, does not specifically target Althusser in any respect. It is rather Althusser who years later comes to criticize Lacan's notion of the symbolic, precisely by rejecting the upper level of the graph. He does so, however, not because he wants to reinstate the "utopian" position of Marx's, whatever this means,⁴³ but because he wants to emphasize the ultimate inefficiency or insufficiency of the symbolic law in suturing the wound opened up by class antagonism in the middle of society. By systematically misinterpreting the Lacanian graph of desire, Žižek distorts the entire picture of "the Althusser-Lacan debate." It is important, therefore, to carefully reconstruct Althusser's discussions and criticisms of Lacan. This is what Žižek never tries to do, and this is just what we are going to do in chapter 3. But, first, let us examine in the next chapter what changes in the later Lacan, because, according to Žižek, it is the later Lacan who focuses on the order of the real rather than that of the symbolic.

⁴³ It is true that in Marx there is found a utopian tendency. But it is equally true that there is also in him an anti-utopian, anti-teleological tendency competing with it. The definition of communism he offers in his *German Ideology* eloquently shows this: "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* still to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premises." (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *German Ideology* [New York: Prometheus Book, 1998], p. 57). Hence it is less important to criticize away Marx's utopian ideas than to analyze such fissures in order to locate deep-seated difficulties in Marx's thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LATER LACAN

I thought about ‘letters’ which, although posted, do not always reach the addressee.

Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*

When Does the Later Lacan Arrive?

As we saw in the previous chapter, Althusser questions the possibility that the symbolic can be extracted from the imaginary in a definite manner. It cannot be said that he rejects the notion of the symbolic in its entirety. He does reject, however, the idea that social antagonisms can be effectively pacified under the reign of the paternal symbolic law established beyond the ambivalent effects of the imaginary. Lacan in contrast tries to show that only the symbolic proper, theoretically attained at the upper level of the graph of desire, can offer the subject a unique way out of the predicament that it is trapped in regarding the imaginary-symbolic relationship that it forms with the enigmatic desire of the mOther (*Che Vuoi?*); it is from the subject’s failure to isolate the “pure symbolic” that various forms of mental illness result.

Of course, according to Žižek (and many other Lacanian scholars), this is not the final position that Lacan holds during his later days; the later Lacan privileges the dimension of the real over that of the symbolic, and it is from this point of view that the

fundamental deficiency in Althusser's theory can be properly detected and criticized.

Žižek claims that Althusser, by ignoring the dimension of the real, ends up with an "ethics of alienation" that fails to offer the subject a real chance to subvert the dominant structure of society.

Then, when does this celebrated rupture take place? In other words, when does the later Lacan finally arrive? Depending on how we answer this question, the nature of the Althusser-Lacan debate can be viewed in quite different lights. One should understand, however, that it is not a matter of identifying every single new idea or even formulation that Lacan tries to add to the body of his psychoanalytic theory; it is not even a question of bringing into relief changes that seem to occur in his favorite topics of discussion (just because he talks about a certain aspect or register more often, that does not mean it is given a remarkably new position or status in his theory). It is rather a question of determining whether there are certain fundamental ruptures to which Lacan's *entire theoretical field* is submitted.

Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* locates the final rupture as early as in the late 1950s (*SOI*, 131 ff). According to him, there are three major periods we can distinguish in the line of development of Lacan's theory. The earliest is the period dominated by the Hegelian phenomenological idea that "the word is the death of a thing." In this period Lacan explores various consequences of the idea that, once we have spoken a word, it becomes impossible to return to the untainted reality of pre-intelligible things. The second period starts with the "Seminar on the Purloined Letter" (1955), and is characterized by the shift in Lacan's focus to language understood no longer as a

collection of words that replace (or “murder”) things, but as a synchronic structure of signifiers that can spontaneously generate an effect of signification. During this “structuralist” period, Lacan not only grants a central place to the symbolic order in his theoretical system, but also identifies it with the death drive of “repetition automatism,” which operates beyond the pleasure principle (at this stage, the pleasure principle is merely deemed imaginary). The third period, whose accent is unambiguously put on “the real as impossible,” begins with *Seminar VII* (1958). The symbolic order is now considered what is still confined, just like the imaginary, within the limit of the pleasure principle. What is beyond, Žižek claims, is no longer the symbolic, but “a real kernel, a traumatic core,” which Lacan calls *das Ding* (the “pre-symbolic maternal Thing”).

Žižek later somewhat changes his view about *Seminar VII*, and argues that it comes dangerously close to Bataille’s idea of “transgression.”¹ It remains uncertain, however, if this implies for him a certain modification to his earlier periodization is now considered necessary. It still seems safe to say that he situates the irreversible beginning of the later Lacan somewhere between *Seminar VII* and *Seminar XI* (1964-65), the latter being the one in which, as we know, the celebrated concept of separation is introduced in opposition to that of alienation. Alenka Zupančič, who belongs to the same Slovenian psychoanalytic school with Žižek, also argues that *Seminar VII*, which highlights the role of desire, is not exactly canceled but “supplemented” by *Seminar XI*, whose main interest lies in the concept of drive (namely, death drive).²

¹ Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: The MIT press, 2006), p. 94.

² Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real. Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 239.

In fact, it is *Seminar XI* that a good number of Lacanian scholars seem to view as marking the genuine threshold to the later Lacan. For example, Paul Verhaeghe claims that “from the 1964 *Seminar XI* onwards, the real becomes a genuine Lacanian concept, within a strictly Lacanian theory, and changes the theory of the subject in a very fundamental way.”³ In a similar vein, Éric Laurent argues that “the introduction of alienation and separation [in 1964] . . . represented a break”; this new conceptual pair “substituted” the old pair of metonymy and metaphor that was given a central place in Lacan’s theory prior to 1964.⁴

The table of periodization that I would like to propose here is radically different, and has only two phases in it: the early and the later Lacan. The rupture takes place precisely in *Seminar XX* (1972-73), titled significantly enough *Encore* (which, at least in one essential aspect, is to be interpreted as doing it again or re-doing it). Its discontinuity consists in the fact that the supreme status Lacan never stopped assigning to the symbolic law *qua* the instrument for “the subversion of the subject” up until that point is abandoned or at least gravely relativized in this seminar.⁵

³ Paul Verhaeghe, “Causation and Destitution of a Pre-ontological Non-entity: On the Lacanian Subject,” *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (New York: Other Press, 1998), p. 165.

⁴ É. Laurent, “Alienation and Separation (I),” in R. Feldstein, B. Fink and M. Jaanus (eds.), *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 19. However, as we shall see, the conceptual pair of metonymy and metaphor is still central to Lacan’s discussion of alienation and separation.

⁵ The periodization I developed seems to partly converge with Jacques-Alain Miller’s recent periodization. According to the “Preface” that Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf attach to a collection of papers by Lacanian-Millerian scholars, titled *The Later Lacan* (2007), Miller seems to have developed in his “ongoing Paris seminar” a periodization that looks quite different from Žižek’s. He also distinguishes three phases corresponding to the three Lacanian orders (the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real). But the first phase (the imaginary period) is taken to last much longer than Žižek’s: that is, until *Seminar X*. In this phase Lacan tries to find a way to dismantle the resistance of the imaginary by instrumentalizing “the

Regarding our discussion at hand, adopting this periodization implies two things. First, it confirms that the debate between Althusser and Lacan, most of which we know took place prior to 1972,⁶ indeed orbited around the notion of the symbolic rather than the real; well into the early 1970s, Lacan still upheld his belief in the absolute necessity of the symbolic law. Secondly—and this is even more important than the first one—it manifestly shows that it is rather Lacan who later made a profound change in his position, and thus in a sense *converged with* Althusser (if only to diverge again).

In the following second section, I will engage myself in a close reading of certain parts of *Seminar XI* in which the concepts of alienation and separation are elaborated. While focusing on the central issue of “aphanisis” (i.e. the disappearance of the subject), I will try to demonstrate that the fundamental structure of Lacan’s theory remains *unchanged*; and that it is exactly for this reason that this seminar still concludes

symbolic axis”. In the second phase (the symbolic period) that is spread over the time span from *Seminar XI* to *XIX*, Lacan formalizes the object *a*, and seeks to “absorb, treat, or at least account for the residual real caught in the symbolic” by working consistently on “the parameters of subjective positioning in the Other or symbolic order.” The final phase (the real period) is what is referred to as “the later Lacan,” and it only starts with *Seminar XX*. It is characterized by a concern with the real (jouissance) not merely understood as what is unsettling for the symbolic balance of meaning, but also as what is integrated to language itself through its dimension of *lalangue*. For further details of this Millerian periodization, see Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf, “The Preface,” *The Later Lacan. An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. vii-xvii. Of course, it is quite difficult for me to fully assess this periodization when it is not yet available in any published form. I would simply like to indicate that this seems to me to be a much more agreeable periodization than Žižek’s. However, it is noteworthy that for Miller Lacan from *both* the first phase *and* the second heavily depends on the role of the symbolic, whether he is dealing with the imaginary resistance or with the upsetting effects of the real. This is why I do not think that there is a fundamental rupture taking place in *Seminar XI*. As for the disrupting character of the real, it is already well noticed by Lacan as early as in *Seminar VII*.

⁶ In 1969 Lacan left the *École normale supérieure*, and thereby Althusser himself. It was around that time that their letter exchanges also came to a stop. Of course, as I already mentioned, Althusser criticized Lacan even after this parting; but it seems unlikely that he was well aware of Lacan’s works of the 1970s (especially, *Seminar XX*).

defending the Kantian theory of the moral law.⁷ I will show why Lacan supports Kant even after revealing the latter's truth lies in the Sadean perversion that he clearly turns down as an improper way to realize the subject's desire. In the third section, I will try to locate the rupture between the early and the later Lacan in *Seminar XX*, and to show in what sense it can be said that Lacan, through this rupture, converged with Althusser. I will also explore some of the major theoretical effects of it by briefly reflecting upon the concept of *sinthome* that Lacan develops in *Seminar XXIII*.

On Seminar XI: The Question of Aphanisis

In the last part (from session XVI onwards) of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI)*, Lacan develops two salient concepts, alienation and separation, in order to illustrate the two successive alternative modes of the subject's relationship to the Other. These two concepts (especially, separation) have provided Lacanian scholars with an inexhaustible source of theoretical discussions. However, it has often passed unnoticed by commentators that it is practically impossible to accurately understand either one of the concepts without understanding yet another concept named "aphanisis," which Lacan borrows from Ernest Jones with a significant modification (he redefines it as the fading of *the subject* in contrast to Jones's original definition which views it as the disappearance of *desire*). For instance, Bruce Fink, while presenting an exegesis of the two concepts in his *The Lacanian Subject*, does

⁷ Zupančič is apparently perplexed by this conclusion of the whole seminar which in no ambiguous terms praises, once again, what Lacan calls "pure desire" which is identified with the Kantian moral law itself. This is why she wants to maintain in her *Ethics of the Real* the somewhat ambiguous position that *Seminar VII* is "supplemented" by *Seminar XI*.

not pay enough attention to the concept of aphanisis (in fact he hardly mentions it). This inattention, as we shall see, cannot be without consequences.⁸

Alienation

Alienation is the concept that Lacan utilizes to describe the primordial situation in which the subject encounters language for the first time. As yet, the subject is considered to be in a pre-linguistic biological state (“a sexed living being”). When the subject encounters the field of the Other *qua* language, and submits itself to it, the Other reduces the subject to “being no more than a signifier,” petrifying it by the same movement in which it is called upon “to function, to speak, as subject.”⁹ This might seem like a situation of total alienation. Yet Lacan in a key passage brings a decisive twist to the concept by introducing a new structure that he names the “*vel*”:

One has to admit that there is a lot of this alienation about nowadays. Whatever one does, one is always a bit more alienated, whether in economics, politics, psychopathology, aesthetics, and so on. It may be no bad thing to see what the root of this celebrated alienation really is. Does it mean, as I seem to be saying, that the subject is condemned to seeing himself emerge, *in initio*, only in the field of the Other? Could it be that? Well, it isn’t. Not at all—not at all—not at all. Alienation consists in this *vel*, which . . . condemns the subject to appearing only in that *division* . . . if it appears on one side as *meaning*, produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as *aphanisis* (*Se XI*, 210; emphasis added).

Hence, the *vel* is what constitutes the essential structure of alienation manifested in every encounter between subject and language. As Lacan explains it, the *vel* is a Latin disjunctive that corresponds to the “or” in contemporary English. He prefers the Latin term because he wants to relate it to the small “v” of the lower half of the lozenge (the

⁸ See Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 49 ff.

⁹ *Se XI*, 207. I will return to this argument of Lacan’s at the end of this subsection on alienation.

diamond shaped circular movement) found in his formula such as $\$ \diamond a$ (formula for fantasy). What it basically does is to effectively introduce a division into the subject, thereby forcing the subject to become the barred subject ($\$$). When it enters the field of language, the subject is not utterly subsumed by it, but rather split in two. It appears and disappears simultaneously. While appearing on one side as “meaning” supported by a signifier, the subject on the other appears as “aphanisis,” as disappearance.

Yet it remains to be answered precisely in what way this *vel* operates to produce such a division. To investigate this question, Lacan defines his *vel* with a further precision. According to him, there are two different kinds of *vel* typically recognized by formal logic (*Se XI*, 210). The first is the exclusive *vel*: “I *either* go here *or* there. If I choose to go here, that means I can’t go there, etc.” The second kind is the indifferent *vel* that we see in such a sentence as “it does not matter whether I go here *or* there.” But Lacan says neither of these two kinds serves his purpose. Thus he invents the third kind of *vel*, which truly defines the fundamental structure of his concept of alienation. It is specifically related to a situation in which there occurs a certain “joining” between two choices *qua* sets. Lacan argues:

To speak as one speaks when it is a question of sets, adding two collections together is not identical to joining them. If in this circle, that on the left, there are five objects, and if, in the other, there are also five—adding them together makes ten. But some of them may belong to both circles. If there are two that belong to each of the two circles, joining them together will in this instance consist not in doubling their number—there will be in all only eight objects. I apologize if I am being naïve in reminding you of this, but *it is in order to give you the notion that this vel that I will try to articulate for you is supported only on the logical form of joining.* (*Se XI*, 211; emphasis added)

When there are certain elements shared by two sets, the total number of the elements resulting from the union of the two sets is not the same as the simple addition of the respective numbers of their elements counted separately. It is the shared elements that prevent us from making a clear cut choice between the two sets. Even if we choose one set over the other, we may still end up with certain elements in our hands ambiguously belonging to the set we decide not to select. In this situation, what matters most for the subject is to know what kind of dissymmetrical effect ensues from each choice it makes.

Lacan illustrates the logic of the third *vel* with the famous example of a mugger's threat: "Your money or your life!" If the person who is being mugged chooses money over life, he may lose money *as well as* life (for the obvious reason that money is no good for someone already dead). But if he chooses otherwise, then he keeps life, only losing money in his pocket. Even if that money is literally all he got, and thus he loses everything, he still saves life with which he may hope to earn some money in the future. In this sense, life *is* money to a certain extent. This overlapping between money and life is what can be said to form, in this context, the joined area of the two relatively heterogeneous sets. When an encounter takes place between the field of the subject (being) and that of the Other (meaning), the subject faces a similar situation of dissymmetrical choice. If it chooses being over meaning by adamantly remaining outside language, it loses being *as well as* meaning. But if it chooses otherwise, it not only preserves meaning, but also a certain part of being.

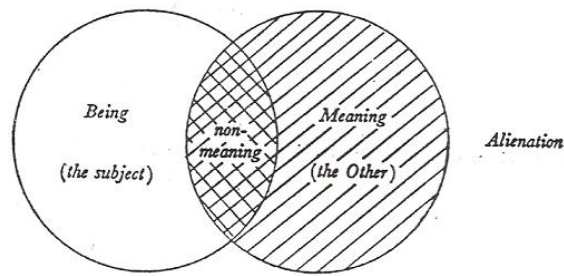


Fig. 6. Alienation (*Se XI*, 211)

The crucial point that Lacan wants to draw here is that what creates all the trouble in the world of language is, in fact, *not* the part of “being” purely and simply abandoned by the subject in this process, *but* the other part caught in the field of the Other. This modicum of being, which remains even after the subject tries to renounce being unequivocally in order to enter language, is what belongs to the in-between area of being and meaning, presented by Lacan in his diagram of alienation as the checkered area of “non-meaning” (see Fig. 6). The whole phenomenon of aphanisis, as we shall see, takes place in this area; a certain part of being of the subject is at once preserved and eclipsed there (it *appears as disappearance*). It is in this “extimate” area, in this subterranean region of language that is bitten into by the field of being, that the subject of the unconscious is going to be formed while the ego appears elsewhere as “meaning” sustained by a signifier.

Fink in *The Lacanian Subject* somewhat mistakenly suggests that Lacan’s concept of alienation involves “an either/or—a *vel* . . . amounting to an *exclusive* choice between two parties, to be decided by their struggle to the death.”¹⁰ It is true that, with this

¹⁰ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 51; original emphasis.

exclusive *vel*, Fink still successfully points out that the subject's initial choice to enter the field of the Other is by no means a real choice, but only a "forced choice." No doubt this is one of the aspects that Lacan wants to highlight with regard to the subject's alienated choice. But it is certainly not the only aspect of it, nor the aspect discussed most in this seminar.¹¹ If the compulsive nature of the choice were Lacan's only concern, then there would be no need for him to introduce the third kind of *vel*. The exclusive *vel* alone could have served his purpose as well as Fink suggests it does (in other words, Lacan simply could have made an argument to the effect that, since the mugger's victim cannot choose both money and life, but exclusively only one of them, he is *forced to choose* life and give up money).

However, Lacan does invent the third kind of *vel*, in which two choices are not exclusive of each other but partly overlapping, because he wants to establish through the logical operation of this particular *vel* the in-between area of "non-meaning," which, as we shall see, is where the unconscious is situated. If, as Fink says, the subject at the level of alienation merely operated according to the logic of the exclusive *vel*, then, by choosing "meaning" over "being," it would lose *all* connections to its "being", and thus would be completely subsumed by the field of the Other; consequently, there would be no logical ground for any "remainder," no possibility of a further dialectical development, which may lead to a certain subversion of the subject. If Fink is unable to explain accurately in what way the aphanisis of the subject takes place, and what theoretical

¹¹ The phrase "forced choice" does not appear in *Seminar XI*, but briefly in *Seminar XV* (the session held on January 10, 1968).

consequences it entails, it is because he does not take into account this third kind of *vel* that Lacan carefully develops to show the specificity of his concept of alienation. Fink's only comment related to aphanisis (still without mentioning its name) is that, through the process of alienation, the subject chooses its own disappearance, and as a result loses its being *in its entirety*. But, in my understanding, Lacan's point is rather that a certain part of the subject's "being" sediments as "non-meaning" and thus constitutes the unconscious (this is precisely what the term "aphanisis" means: fading into the unconscious).¹²

At this point, however, we should ask ourselves questions that have been lingering in the back of our minds: namely, why is there such an overlapping between subject and language in the first place?; what can possibly belong to both the field of the subject (the pre-linguistic biological being) and that of the Other (language)?; in other words, what is the nature of the modicum of being that is caught by the field of the Other in the process of alienation? Lacan's discussion of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* at the beginning of session XVII, titled "Aphanisis," gives us an essential clue, because what forms the in-between

¹² Fink's misunderstanding of the Lacanian *vel* also leads him to believe that, if the child steadfastly chooses being over meaning, then it becomes a psychotic. Fink calls this the child's "victory" over the Other (*The Lacanian Subject*, p. 49). Indeed, the logic of the exclusive *vel* would justify this as the result of choosing being over meaning; the child gets to keep being because it has given up meaning. But isn't it rather the point of Lacan's third kind of *vel* that the subject who does not choose meaning does not get to keep being, either? In other words, the child loses being *as well as* meaning. There is no such thing as the child's "victory"; it loses in all cases. The Lacanian *vel* only determines how it loses—*not* whether it loses. In fact, for Lacan, a psychotic reaction is not triggered when the subject refuses to enter language, but on the contrary when it is completely subsumed by language, that is, when the Other's seizure upon the child is complete, allowing no intervals between them (see *Se XI*, 237). Probably Lacan's idea is that, in a situation of total alienation, the Name-of-the-Father is foreclosed due to the utter lack of intervals between the mOther and the child; consequently, a psychotic reaction is triggered. Concerning this issue, Žižek makes a claim quite similar to Fink's. See Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism?," in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (New York: Verso, 2000), p. 119.

area of subject and language is exactly this *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* qua the signifier which becomes primal-repressed through the process of alienation.¹³

Lacan sets off his discussion by introducing to the audience a debate that he had not so long ago with two of his pupils concerning the issue of how to translate one of the meta-psychological terms that Freud devised up: namely, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. Lacan originally translated it as “*le représentant de la représentation*”; yet the two pupils disapproved of it as a mistranslation, and proposed a new one, “*le représentant représentatif*.” Alan Sheridan, the English translator of *Seminar XI*, renders Lacan’s translation as “the representative of the representation.” This translation is certainly not inaccurate; but it runs into trouble when it tries to apply similar terms to translate the other French rendition of the two pupils’. Sheridan could not help but translate it as “the representative representative,” which is highly confusing. It would be much better if we employ another group of terms to designate the aspect of *Vorstellung*: “idea” and “ideational.” In this case, Lacan’s *le représentant de la représentation* would be rendered as “the representative of the idea,” while *le représentant représentatif* as “the ideational representative.”

To get a sense of what the debate was all about, we would better have to read the explanation of the term in question that Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis

¹³ Although the phrase “primal-repressed” is not grammatically appropriate, nevertheless I think it is important to keep its terminological link to the concept of primal repression. In fact, the “primal repressed” is an expression customarily used in psychoanalysis. See the article on “primal repression” in J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), pp. 333-34.

provide in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (Laplanche was himself one of those two pupils, the other being Serge Leclaire).¹⁴ “Ideational representative” is

[An] idea or group of ideas to which the drive becomes fixated in the course of the subject’s history; it is through the mediation of the ideational representative that the drive leaves its mark in the psyche . . . ‘*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*’ means *a delegate in the sphere of ideas*; it should be stressed that according to Freud’s conception *it is the idea that represents the drive, not the idea itself that is represented by something else*—Freud is quite explicit about this.¹⁵

Therefore, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is the notion that Freud designed to hypothesize the mysterious connection between *soma* and *psyche*. This is exactly why Lacan is discussing this notion here while engaging himself with the question of the joining between the field of the subject (“a living being”) and that of the Other (language). In this perspective, the real issue of the debate does not merely appear to be which French phrase or expression is more appropriate to translate the German term, but rather how one ought to theoretically characterize this bridge or borderland between the body and the mind that Freud tried to capture with that term.

By translating *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* as “the representative of the idea,” Lacan insists that it is still an idea that is re-presented in the psyche. His two pupils, on the other hand, render it as “the ideational representative” in order to underline that it is the drive that is re-presented by an idea in psyche. Thus the whole debate boils down to this: what

¹⁴ Laplanche and Leclaire presented a paper on “the unconscious” at the Bonneval Congress (1960), in which they questioned Lacan’s fundamental thesis: “the unconscious is structured like a language.” See Laplanche and Leclaire, “The Unconscious: a psychoanalytic study,” trans. Patrick Coleman, in *Yale French Studies*, no. 48, 1972. It is also helpful to read in this regard the interview, “Jean Laplanche talks to Martin Stanton” in John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (eds.), *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, Drives* (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1992), pp. 3-18.

¹⁵ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 203-204; emphasis added and translation modified (I have substituted “drive” for “instinct”).

lies at the core of the unconscious, an idea or a (non-ideational) drive? If it is an idea, as Lacan says, then it would be still possible to think of this core as something of a linguistic or quasi-linguistic nature. But if it is a non-ideational drive (namely, a sexual drive), then the core would be no longer considered linguistic. The two pupils criticize Lacan for reducing the unconscious to language¹⁶; and Lacan criticizes them back by arguing that “they make desire the ideational representative of need” (*Se XI*, 218, translation modified), that is, of *biological* need.

It is out of the scope of my dissertation to determine which side in this important debate had the high ground. I am here simply interested in the way in which Lacan approaches the problem of the joining between subject and language. Identifying the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* with what he calls “the binary signifier,” Lacan argues:

We can locate this *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* in our schema of the original mechanisms of *alienation* in that first signifying coupling that enables us to conceive that the subject appears first in the Other, in so far as the first signifier, *the unary signifier*, emerges in the field of the Other and represents the subject for another signifier, which other signifier has as its effect *the aphanisis of the subject*. Hence the division of the subject—when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as ‘fading’, as disappearance. There is, then, one might say, a matter of life and death between the unary signifier and the subject, *qua* binary signifier, cause of his disappearance. The *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is *the binary signifier* (*Se XI*, 218; emphasis added).

Nous pouvons le localizer dans notre schema des mécanismes originels de l'aliénation, ce Vorstellungsrepräsentanz, dans ce premier couplage signifiant qui nous permet de concevoir que le sujet apparaît d'abord dans l'Autre, en tant que le premier signifiant, le signifiant unaire, surgit au champ de l'Autre, et qu'il représente le sujet, pour un autre signifiant, lequel autre signifiant a pour effet

¹⁶ Laplanche and Pontalis states: “The preconscious-conscious system is characterized by the fact that thing-presentations therein are bound to the corresponding word-presentation—a situation which does not exist, by contrast, in the unconscious system, where only thing-presentations are found” (*The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 447-48).

*l'aphanisis du sujet. D'où, division du sujet—lorsque le sujet apparaît quelque part comme sens, ailleurs il se manifeste comme fading, comme disparition. Il y a donc, si l'on peut dire, affaire de vie et de mort entre le signifiant unaire, et le sujet en tant que signifiant binaire, cause de sa disparition. Le Vorstellungsrepräsentanz, c'est le signifiant binaire.*¹⁷

A careful reading of this passage tells us that what Lacan here calls the unary signifier (written S_1) and the binary signifier (written S_2) are not simply the two signifiers in a row that the subject hears from the Other with a certain time interval. The standard usual reading of this passage, for example, offered by Fink goes: “ S_2 represents a subject to S_1 in the sense that S_2 retroactively gives meaning to S_1 , a meaning it did not have at the outset.”¹⁸ But can this really be what Lacan means here? To mention only one thing, Lacan does not say that S_2 represents the subject to S_1 , but on the contrary that S_1 , the unary signifier, represents the subject to S_2 .

The alternative reading that I would like to put forward is as follows: the unary signifier is indeed the signifier of the Other, namely what the master speaks (hence, its other name “the master signifier”); however, the binary signifier, although it certainly

¹⁷ Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 243.

¹⁸ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, pp. 75-76. Éric Laurent (apparently following Jacques-Alain Miller) also presents a somewhat similar interpretation of alienation by putting S_1 in the middle area in which the two circles of being and meaning are joined; he places $\$$ in the left part of the circle of being, while putting S_2 in the right part of the circle of meaning (Laurent, “Alienation and Separation (I),” pp. 24-25). But, as we shall see, what should be placed in the middle area when the process of alienation is complete is S_2 , while S_1 should be placed in the right part of the circle of meaning. The $\$$, which should not be confused with the primordial biological subject corresponding to the initial full circle of being, is a result of the subject’s split between meaning and non-meaning, which takes place *within* the full circle of meaning or language because he has already entered language (see Fig. 6). The subject appears as meaning in one part of that circle, while as non-meaning in the other part (the middle area). Lacan clearly states that “non meaning” is represented by the middle area, the part of the circle of meaning which is bitten into by the other circle of being (*Se XI*, 211). The left part of the circle of being excluding the middle area rather represents what is purely and simply given up by the subject (and thus becomes irrelevant to the psyche of the subject), while the middle area itself represents the modicum of being that still lingers after the subject clearly makes the choice to enter language.

arrives after an interval, does not really designate the second signifier that the master speaks, but rather the signifier that *the subject itself*—the child—*speaks* (or the signifier that the subject catches from the field of the Other and makes into its own). Only understood in this way, does Lacan's following remark make sense: "There is, then, one might say, a matter of life and death between the unary signifier and the subject, *qua* binary signifier."

In fact, Lacan already discussed the binary signifier in this way prior to this occasion. In order to elucidate the relationship among S_1 , S_2 and $\$$, Lacan at the end of session XV presents the following schematic picture.

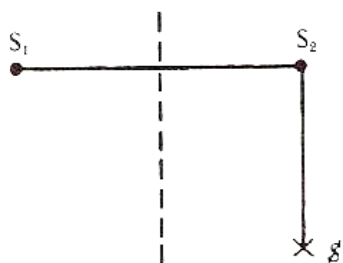


Fig. 7. S_1 , S_2 and $\$$ (*Se XI*, 198)

Let us first pay attention to the fact that S_1 and S_2 here belong to the two different fields distinguished by the perforated line that goes in the middle. Let us also notice that it is when S_2 emerges in response to S_1 that the subject is formed as split. Trying to explicate the meaning of this very schematic picture, Lacan immediately emphasizes that the signifier is not what represents the subject to another subject, but only to another signifier. What represents the subject to another subject is a *sign*. For example, if you are lost in a seemingly uninhabited island, and yet you suddenly see a smoke at a distance,

you instantly realize that there is another subject on this island. In this case the smoke is such a sign; it represents the subject to another subject.¹⁹ The function of the signifier, on the other hand, cannot be conceived in this way. For instance, if in a desert you come across a stone covered with some ancient hieroglyphics unknown to you, you realize, just like when you see the smoke on the island, that there is a subject behind it. But the signifiers written there are not addressed to you at all; the fact that you do not understand any of them proves it. Lacan says, “Each of these signifiers is related to each of the others [*chacun de ces signifiants se rapporte à chacun des autres*]” (*Se XI*, 199). In other words, the signifiers are not related to you, but only to one another. They surely represent the subject (namely, whoever wrote them); but they represent it only to themselves, only to one another among themselves. “It is this,” Lacan argues, “that is at issue with the relation between the subject and the field of the Other” (*Ibid.*).

Indeed, this is quite equivalent to the situation the child is thrown into when it first learns language. The child encounters the signifiers (namely, the unary signifier, S_1 , which *collectively* denotes all the signifiers that the Other speaks); but the child does not understand any of them (like the unknown hieroglyphics), because each of the signifiers represents the Other *qua* subject to each of the other signifiers, but not to the child. Then, something fundamental happens. “The subject is born,” Lacan says, “in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other. But, by this very fact, this subject—which was previously nothing, if not a subject to come—*solidifies* [*se fige*] *into a signifier*.”²⁰ This

¹⁹ This example of smoke is not from *Seminar XI*, but still Lacan’s own. See *Se XX*, 49.

²⁰ *Se XI*, 199; emphasis added and translation modified.

signifier into which the subject solidifies is what Lacan indicates as S_2 in Fig. 7, namely *the binary signifier*. A few paragraphs down, Lacan closely relates this idea to the formation of the unconscious as well as the division of the subject (namely, \$): “You will also understand that, if I have spoken to you of the unconscious as of something that opens and closes, it is because its essence is to mark that time by which, from the fact of being born with the signifier, the subject is born divided. The subject is this emergence which . . . solidifies into a signifier” (Ibid.).

Why is this solidification so fundamental? It is because this solidification into a signifier is *the only path* through which the subject is allowed to enter language. The subject enters it only insofar as it turns itself into a signifier. The signifier of the master, as we already discussed in chapter 1, is the Thing (*das Ding*) that merely and unrelentingly relates to itself. Each of the signifiers of the master is related to each of her other signifiers, but *not to the subject*. Consequently, the subject can have no relationship whatsoever with them *except as a signifier*. The subject itself must become a signifier in order to come into contact with the master’s signifier. It might be helpful to compare this situation to what happens in the market as Marx explains it. A commodity good as a use value can never enter into relation with other commodity goods, but only as an exchange value, that is to say, insofar as it turns into a commodity whose value is commensurable with other commodities’. Likewise the subject cannot enter language as subject, but only as a signifier.

It is true that what Lacan implies by the solidification of the subject into a signifier still remains a bit vague here; yet, at the beginning of the next session on alienation (XVI), he clarifies his intention for us in a tangible manner. He says,

The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than *a signifier*, to petrify the subject by [*de*] the same movement in which *it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject*. There, strictly speaking, is the temporal pulsation in which is established that which is the characteristic of the departure of the unconscious as such—the closing. (*Se XI*, 207; emphasis added and translation modified)

*Le signifiant se produisant au champ de l'Autre fait surgir le sujet de sa signification. Mais il ne fonctionne comme signifiant qu'à réduire le sujet en instance à n'être plus qu'un signifiant, à le pétrifier du même mouvement où il l'appelle à fonctionner, à parler, comme sujet. Là est proprement la pulsation temporelle où s'institue ce qui est la caractéristique du départ de l'inconscient comme tel—la fermeture.*²¹

Here, “the signifier” in the first line of the quote, which Lacan says produces itself in the field of the Other, is the *unary* signifier. This signifier is what reduces the subject into “being no more than a signifier,” namely the *binary* signifier. The unary signifier petrifies the subject into this binary signifier by the very same movement in which it calls it “to function, to speak, as subject.” The solidification/petrification of the subject into a signifier, therefore, indicates nothing other than the experience in which the subject is called upon by the Other to participate in the community of speaking beings precisely by *speaking*.²² Once the biological pre-subject thus produces its own signifier, it itself

²¹ Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, p. 232.

²² Here we may also refer to Lacan's description of the same situation in another essay: “The same structure explains the subject's original division. Produced in the locus of the yet-to-be situated Other, the signifier brings forth a subject from a being that cannot yet speak, but at the cost of freezing him. The ready-to-speak that *was to be* there—in both senses of the French imperfect “*il y avait*,” placing the ready-to-speak an instant before (it was there but is no longer), but also an instant after (a few moments more and

becomes the subject represented by a signifier to another signifier. As it enters language, the subject becomes divided: it appears as meaning on the one side, as it appears on the other as aphanisis, a disappearance which corresponds to what Lacan calls here “the closing.”²³

This is why, right after this passage, Lacan introduces, for the first time, the concept of aphanisis, for which he gives partial credit to Ernest Jones. Lacan further specifies that the subject at this rudimentary stage does not even speak *to* others (neither for himself nor for others); instead, he speaks *next to* others, like an automaton, “*parlant à la cantonade*,” speaking toward a side or the back of the stage, addressing no one in particular (*Se XI*, 208). The subject, in other words, does not yet show the ability to address others by properly manipulating the grammatical “shifters” such as the *I* or the *You*. This is in fact very typical of speeches of young children who have just learned to speak. They often repeat, in their own speeches, the *I* of adults’ without realizing that it designates the adults, while they themselves are designated by the *You*.

it would have been there because it could have been there)—disappears, no longer being anything but a signifier” (“Position of the Unconscious” [*EC*, 713]).

²³ One may be tempted to think that the signifier into which the subject solidifies simply designates the subject’s name (proper name). For instance, Anika Lemaire offers such an interpretation in her *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Marcey (London: Routledge, 1979), pp. 69-71. According to her, the binary signifier (S_2) appears as the signifier that *represses* the pre-linguistic “real” subject (here the division of the subject is understood as a division between the subject’s name and the “real” subject). However, as we shall see soon, for Lacan, the binary signifier is the signifier that is itself primal-repressed in the process of alienation. It is quite inconceivable that the subject’s proper name becomes primal-repressed, although it may well be said that the binary signifier is what operates behind the scene whenever the subject’s proper name is pronounced; but it is not itself the proper name.

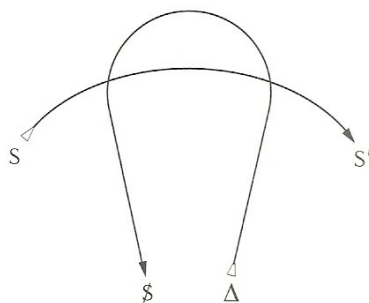


Fig. 8. The Elementary Cell (EC, 681)

Thus we realize that the parabolic line in the Lacanian elementary cell, which moves from the little triangle to the barred subject (the \$), intersecting twice the line of the signifiers SS' , is not simply a line representing the subject's interpretation of the signifying chain of the Other; it is also a line of *the subject's own initiation of speaking*, co-primordially related to this interpretation itself. The line of SS' , which here figures the movement of the master signifier,²⁴ is what calls the pre-subject "to function, to speak, as subject." In fact, the commandment of the senseless master signifier at this stage is less "Understand!" than "Speak!" The Other is the mugger, in other words, who makes an

²⁴ Fink in his more recent book still identifies S with S_1 , and S' with S_2 . See Fink, *Lacan to the Letter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 114-16. However, the SS' is the structure of the S_1 , the master signifier itself. Let us take the example from chapter 1 again. If somebody tells you, "I am hungry for knowledge!", the signified of the first signifier "I" is relatively fixed only when the signifier "am" arrives. But, then, the whole phrase "I am" itself turns into a signifier without the signified, because its signified remains undetermined until the signifier "hungry" arrives. Likewise, the whole phrase "I am hungry" turns into yet another signifier whose signified is yet to be determined by the arrival of the new signifiers "for" and "knowledge." In this way, the master signifier *always already* includes an empty place within its temporal structure. The S' is the empty place into which future signifiers continually arrive. This structure is probably what Žižek wants to point out when he discusses the relation between the master signifier and the binary signifier, and says, "The original split is not between the One and the Other, but is strictly inherent to the One; it is the split between the One and its empty place of inscription" (*The Parallax View*, p. 38). However, Žižek makes a mistake similar to Fink's when he identifies this empty place of inscription itself with the binary signifier. As I have shown, the whole structure of SS' should be understood as the structure of S_1 itself, while S_2 should be understood as something altogether different, that is, as the subject's *own* signifier.

ultimatum to the subject (the child) by saying: “Speak or die!”, or more precisely, “Your *signifier* or your life!” As soon as the subject surrenders by speaking, the Other takes the signifier away from it.

Therefore, this is one of those familiar situations that we already discussed at length in the previous chapter. Having been talked to by the mOther (the emergence of the unary signifier), the child begins to make its demand by producing its own signifier.²⁵ It does not have to be a real word or a group of words. Depending on circumstances, as insignificant as a broken baby-talk or a fake word is well (and sometimes even better) qualified as a signifier.²⁶ The mOther takes up this signifier, and *interprets* it for the child. She tells the child: “Oh, you mean such and such!” or “you want such and such!” The unary signifier of the master thus *re-presents* the subject’s demand that is made with another signifier (the binary signifier).

The mOther’s interpretation/representation, of course, ultimately distorts the subject’s demand. Such an alteration is structurally inherent to her seemingly innocent interpretation/representation, due to the very fact that the mOther herself has her own desire (even though the child is not yet aware of it). Consequently, there occurs, according to Lacan, a “life and death [struggle] between the unary signifier and the subject *qua* the binary signifier”; sooner or later, one of them has to yield way to the other. When the binary signifier loses the battle to the unary signifier (in other words,

²⁵ Every signifier is always already a demand. Even a cry of the infant, which hardly makes up a signifier, is already a demand of some sort.

²⁶ As Evans says, “while it is true that when Lacan talks about signifiers he is often referring to what others would call simply ‘words’, the two terms are not equivalent.” (*An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 187).

when it is replaced or displaced by the latter's interpretation), it sinks underneath into the nether region of the psyche.²⁷ Lacan argues:

The *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is the *binary signifier*. This signifier constitutes the central point of the *Urverdrängung* [primal repression]—of what, from having passed into the unconscious, will be, as Freud indicates in his theory, the point of *Anziehung*, the point of attraction, through which all the other repressions will be possible, all the other similar passages in the locus of the *Unterdrückt*, of what has passed underneath as signifier. This is what is involved in the term *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* (Ibid.)

Hence, the binary signifier, with which the subject makes its original demand, is what becomes *primal-repressed*. It is indeed the *first* unique signifier which has failed to acquire its proper meaning in the entire field of the Other. It is an *ex-communicated* signifier, a signifier that is cast into a “limbo” as a *non-sensical* entity wholly disconnected from the rest of the signifiers that together form a network to generate meanings for the subject. It is like a “foreign body, *fremde Objekt*” (*Se XI*, 245) found *within* the body proper of language. The binary signifier in this way constitutes the core of the unconscious. It works as the point of attraction for every other future repression

²⁷ Here, Lacan is rather silent about the obvious question: Why does the binary signifier become primal-repressed as it is interpreted away? To think about this question, we may want to refer not only to Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave, which obviously works here as one of Lacan's central references, but also to Kant's account of language. Kant says, “While still alone, man must have been moved by the impulse to communicate—at first to make his existence known—to other living beings around him, especially those that make sounds that he could imitate and afterwards use as names” (“Speculative Beginning of Human History,” in Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, trans. and ed. Ted Humphrey [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983], 50). Discussing this passage, Bonnie Honig suggests that “language, on this account [of Kant's], arises not out of a need to convey information but out of an existential impulse to announce one's existence . . .” (*Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993], pp. 21-22). It is quite conceivable that from Lacan's point of view what the binary signifier primarily conveys is less a demand for things in need (e.g. food) than a demand for the recognition from the Other (a correlate of the existential announcement of one's being). In this perspective, we may suggest that, when the infant's binary signifier is interpreted away only as a demand related to its specific need, what is ultimately repressed is its hidden but more fundamental demand for the recognition. In fact, is this not what Lacan suggests when he says, “For the function of language in speech is not to inform but to evoke” (*EC*, 247)?

(namely, what Freud calls a repression proper). Hence, the binary signifier *is* the “subject of the unconscious” that does not show itself at the level of the statement (*énoncée*) except in the form of a distortion or a fissure that it produces there (for instance, a slip of tongue). Its being, its materiality, its pure signifier-ness is, for Lacan, what sediments in the joining of the two sets known as *soma* and *psyche*.

Separation

Having thus discussed alienation, Lacan introduces his second concept: separation. This concept roughly corresponds to what is indicated by the same term used in the layman’s psychological idea, “separation anxiety” (namely, the child’s fear of parting from the mother). Examining etymological links of the verbs such as *séparer* in French and *separare* in Latin, Lacan argues that it is an operation of not only dressing oneself or defending oneself (a meaning that originates from the French expression *se parer*, in which *parer* means both to dress and to protect), but also of being engendered, of being put into the world (a meaning corresponding to the Latin expression *se parere*). In short, it is a defense of the subject against the mOther’s desire, by means of which it finally becomes able to procure itself from her seizure. It is a self-engendering activity, without which the subject cannot possibly become “autonomous” in any sense of the term.

Yet, more technically speaking, separation can be defined as “that by which the subject finds the return way of the *vel* of alienation” (*Se XI*, 218). It is an Odyssean movement that is indicated by the upper half of the lozenge (◊) that picks up the paralyzing, vacillating, movement of the *vel* (typically manifested in the *Fort-Da* game), and curves it into a full circle. Lacan in another text names this circular movement “*velle*,”

which means in Latin will or desire.²⁸ He gives this name, because he believes that the “only one exit” from the *vel* of alienation is found in “the way of desire” (*Se XI*, 224). As he introduces the concept of separation for the first time in his seminar, he points out right away that it is specifically related to the phenomenon of *transference*, since the latter is what involves the dimension of desire, which is irreducible to that of need. He maintains that separation is effected in a transferential situation wherein the two desires (the Other’s and the subject’s) are intersected or superimposed (*Se XI*, 213). To understand what he means by this, we need to go back to the situation of alienation.

As the subject undergoes the process of primal repression, in which its own signifier—the binary signifier—is *unterdrückt*, it accepts, and identifies with, the meaning produced by the mOther’s unary signifier. Over the course of time, however, the subject begins to notice that the mOther herself is not fully immersed in this dual relationship with it; even if it faithfully lives up to the meaning provided by her signifier (i.e. what she says), it cannot really grasp her desire (the desire of the Other) that constantly slides away in front of its eyes toward another object, another signifier, that in secret embodies the small ϕ (the imaginary phallus). The interval thus introduced within the master signifier, that is, between the signifiers of the mOther, forms the weak spot in the structure of alienation, which in turn offers the subject an opportunity to constitute its own desire, since “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (*Se XI*, 235). Lacan argues:

By separation, the subject finds, one might say, the weak point of the primal dyad of the signifying articulation, in so far as it is alienating in essence. It is in the interval between these two signifiers that resides the desire offered to the mapping of the

²⁸ Lacan, “The Position of the Unconscious” (*EC*, 715)

subject in the experience of the discourse of the Other, of the first Other he has to deal with, let us say, by way of illustration, the mother. It is in so far as her desire is beyond or falls short of what she says, of what she hints at, of what she brings out as meaning, it is in so far as her desire is unknown, it is in this point of lack, that the desire of the subject is constituted. (*Se XI*, 218-19; translation modified)²⁹

The interval in which the mOther's desire is "offered to the mapping of the subject" is *metonymical* in nature (*Se XI*, 214). In such an interval, horizontal quilting points are constantly made and un-made; the subject desperately attempts, and yet fails to fix the meaning of the master signifier. The frustration the subject feels in this unending chase of the mOther's desire corners it into a position from which bursts out the cry of "*Che vuoi?*": she is saying this to me, but what does she want?

This is the moment of "the emergence of the field of transference" (*Se XI*, 213), inasmuch as transference for Lacan is characterized as a situation in which "the subject is looking for [its] certainty" (*Se XI*, 129), that is to say, for some definite answer that can possibly put an end to the doubt and the frustration it suffers in the face of the Other's enigmatic desire. Although many traditional psychoanalytic theorists are just content to view transference in terms of *imaginary affects* of love and hate, nonetheless Lacan wants to theorize it not solely on the ground of imaginary affects, but more importantly on the ground of *symbolic knowledge (savoir)*;³⁰ it is for this reason that the presence of the "subject supposed to *know*" (whose role is played out in analytic situations by the analyst) is absolutely required for any transferential relationship to take effect. Transference

²⁹ Alan Sheridan here twice mistranslates the French term "*son*" into "his," implying it is the child's; the correct translation should be "her," the mother's.

³⁰ For Lacan, *savoir* indicates symbolic knowledge, while *connaissance* imaginary one. See Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 94.

appears as a “Gordian knot” that contains the *impure mixture* of the subject’s unconscious knowledge (namely, the knowledge of the binary signifier, which is revealed in a fleeting manner in the subject’s repetition in action of past traumas),³¹ and the subject’s imaginary resistance to it. It should be conceived *both* as the point upon which the interpretive force of analysis is to be wielded *and* as the point at which a closure is simultaneously triggered by the very force (*Se XI*, 131). Thus there occurs in transference “a movement of the subject that opens up only to close again in a certain temporal pulsation” (*Se XI*, 125). Lacan says:

What Freud shows us, from the outset, is that the transference is essentially resistant, *Übertragungswiderstand* [transference-resistance]. The transference is the means by which the communication of the unconscious is interrupted, by which the unconscious closes up again. Far from being the handing over of powers to the unconscious, the transference is, on the contrary, its closing up. (*Se XI*, 130)

Confronting the Other’s desire and its dominating power over him, the subject at first tries to cope with it by bringing “the answer of the previous lack, of [its] own disappearance, which [it] situates here at the point of lack perceived in the Other” (*Se XI*, 214). The subject asks itself: “*Can the Other lose me?*” In other words, the subject attempts to permanently fix the Other’s enigmatic desire to itself as the sole object; he tries to solve its own riddle “*Che Vuoi?*” by saying, “It is me and only me that the Other desires, and that is why the Other cannot lose me at all costs!” This gives rise to the “fantasy of one’s death” that frequently manifests itself not only in clinical cases like *anorexia nervosa*, but in a series of parallel cases Lacan discusses in his seminar: first,

³¹ This is what the psychoanalytic concept of acting-out means. What is not allowed in words, that is to say, what is repressed from the subject’s conscious discourse, is repeated in action. This is how the subject “remembers” its past traumas.

the case of Freud's patient called "female homosexual" who wants to defy her father's wish for a "normal" daughter by publicly walking around in town with a demimondaine, and yet, upon meeting his utter apathy for her, runs away and throws herself off a railway bridge in order to bring back and maintain his desire regarding her (*Se XI*, 38-39); secondly, the case of the dead son described toward the end of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, who appears in his father's dream and asks, "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" (*Se XI*, 34); finally, the "case" of Jesus Christ, who, by having himself crucified, rather successfully makes God "unconscious," causing Him to be driven by a sort of repetition compulsion to return to the moment of the death of His own son (*Se XI*, 59).

Separation therefore appears as an operation of the "intersection" between two lacks, the Other's and the subject's. However, it remains doubtful that the subject's attempt at its own loss would in and of itself bring about the desired effect of its self-emancipation. The subject's wish for its own loss, its *death drive*, is admittedly one of the essential ingredients needed for its separation; but, as long as this wish is anchored in the "fantasy" of one's own death, as long as it results in yet another *aphanisis* of the subject, it rather coincides with the moment of the "closing up" of the unconscious in the process of transference.³² In a temporal movement of "pulsation," "the subject of the unconscious" surely opens up, but only to quickly close again.

³² Lacan says, "The *first* object he proposes for this parental desire whose object is unknown is his own loss" (*Se XI*, 214; emphasis added).

Furthermore, Lacan continues to warn us that a simple inversion of the positions occupied by the subject and the Other would not get the subject very far. It is because, in the first place, the position of the Other is not much better than that of the subject. To clarify his point, Lacan questions the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the slave, in which the two self-consciousnesses engage with each other in a life-and-death battle for recognition. When the subject (the slave) is confronted with the choice, “Your freedom or your life!”, it thinks that, without life, there would be no point of having freedom. It chooses life deprived of freedom, and thus becomes alienated. The Other (the master), on the other hand, certainly makes its choice for freedom; but it does so only through its possible death, risking its own life; in this sense its freedom at the most profound level implies nothing but a freedom to choose death. Therefore, the Other is equally exposed to the alienating effects of the *dual relationship* it forms with the subject.

According to Lacan, in the French Revolution, people fought with the slogan, “Freedom or death!”, only to find out later (in fact, throughout the long time of the nineteenth century) that the freedom they won in the battle was merely a freedom to choose death, “a freedom to die of hunger” (*Se XI*, 213). The same lethal factor likewise manifested itself to the side of the master during the period of Terror, in which the nature of the master’s freedom was dramatically displayed; when asked by the people to make a choice between “Freedom or death!”, the master had only death to choose in order to have freedom (*Se XI*, 219-20).

It is in this context that Lacan’s following remark becomes significant:

Alienation is linked in an essential way to the function of the dyad of signifiers. It is, indeed, essentially different, *whether there are two or three of them*. If we wish to grasp where the function of the subject resides in this signifying articulation, we must operate with two, because it is only with two that he can be cornered in alienation. As soon as there are three, *the sliding becomes circular*. (Se XI, 236; emphasis added).

This passage may be interpreted as indicating that a certain input of the imaginary phallus into the child-mOther relationship is required in order for any movement of separation whatsoever to be launched on the side of the subject. However, it may as well imply, at a more general level, that the movement of separation as such always has a *triadic* structure, and thus is in need of what we may provisionally call *the ternary signifier*. In fact, as long as what Lacan here calls “the sliding” (*glissement*) involves a metonymical movement in which the desire of the Other is unpredictably displaced, we can say that the “circular” movement set off by the introduction of the ternary signifier must be something that emerges *beyond* the order of metonymy.

Indeed, Lacan later in his seminar suggests that it is by means of metaphoric substitution that the subject can effectuate a full-fledged self-engendering separation. Still debating with the two pupils, Laplanche and Leclaire, Lacan criticizes the “transformed formula” of metaphor that they introduced a few years ago in the Bonneval Congress. The transformed formula reads:

$$\frac{S'}{S} \times \frac{S}{s} = \frac{\frac{S'}{s}}{\bar{S}}$$

As we can see, the innovation that this new formula tries to make is shown in the four-storied structure of its final product. It no longer cancels out the numerator S by the

denominator S ; the trace of the signifier S is kept intact in the final product in the form of S/S . What this basically implies is that at the core of the unconscious there should be present an exceptional signifier which signifies itself or has itself as its signified. Is there such a signifier? Every linguistic signifier is supposed to have a signified distinct from itself. Hence, the inference goes that, if there is a signifier which signifies itself, it must not be a linguistic signifier, but instead an image (“thing-presentation”) whose signified is nothing other than the image itself. Since the signifier S in this formula is not bounded by any signified other than itself, it tends to move about freely, making its own paths by connecting with other images or signifiers in an arbitrary manner (this could explain the extreme plasticity of the primary process).

Lacan’s criticism of this transformed formula is twofold. First, the bar between S and s cannot be manipulated like that of a mathematical fraction without taking precautions, especially because what matters here is a metaphor that produces “the effect of meaning.” It should first and foremost be understood as a *signifying* bar in the Saussurean sense. Secondly, the signifier is what is characterized by its inability to signify itself. To show this, Lacan argues that “the catalogue of catalogues that do not contain themselves is obviously not the same catalogue that does not contain itself” (*Se XI*, 249). In other words, if such a catalogue of catalogues existed, one would face the paradoxical question: Should it enlist itself? If it does not enlist itself, then it paradoxically satisfies its own condition (that is, it itself is one of the catalogues that do not contain themselves) and thus is forced to enlist itself. If, on the other hand, it enlists itself, it is in turn forced to remove itself from the list, because now it rather fails to meet

the condition. The signifier that signifies itself has the same contradictory structure. It tries to contain itself within itself, leaving unanswered the paradoxical question of whether it is itself the container or the contained. In this perspective, Lacan argues, “It is so much easier to realize that what is happening is that a substitutive signifier has been put in the place of another signifier to constitute the effect of metaphor. It refers [to] the signifier that it has usurped elsewhere. If, in fact, one wished to preserve the possibility of a handling of a fractional type, one would place the signifier that has disappeared, the repressed signifier, below the principal bar, in the denominator, *unterdrückt*” (*Se XI*, 249)

Hence, Lacan’s claim is that one must posit two distinct phases in order to properly understand the process of the formation of the unconscious. The first phase is the phase of alienation in which, as we saw earlier, a signifier named “binary” becomes primal-repressed. Only after the primal repression of the binary signifier is achieved, the second phase of separation can come into effect, in which a metaphoric substitution of a signifier by another is achieved. If the first phase has a dual relationship between two signifiers, the second phase has a triadic relationship among three signifiers. The transformed formula, on the other hand, tries to short-circuit these two phases by explaining the primal repression through the mechanism of metaphoric substitution (it is especially Laplanche who insists on this point, while Leclaire expresses his reservation and says that metaphoric substitution does not really explain the primary repression; for this reason

Lacan soon partly saves Leclaire by giving him a credit concerning his idea of psychoanalytic interpretation, as we shall see).³³

Now, Lacan connects the operation of metaphoric substitution not to the primal repression, but on the contrary to its reversal (or subversion), namely the signifying effect of analytic interpretation:

The fact that I have said that the effect of interpretation is to isolate in the subject a kernel, a *kern*, to use Freud's own term, of non-sense, does not mean that interpretation is in itself nonsense. Interpretation is a signification that is not just any signification. It comes here in the place of the *s* and *reverses the relation by which the signifier has the effect, in language, of the signified. It has the effect of bringing out an irreducible signifier*. One must interpret at the level of the *s*, which is not open to all meanings, which cannot be just anything, which is a signification, though no doubt only an approximate one. What is there is rich and complex, when it is a question of the unconscious of the subject, and intended *to bring out irreducible, non-sensical*—composed of non-meanings—*signifying elements*. (Se XI, 250; emphasis added)

Interpretation, therefore, is a sort of signification, a sort of meaning-giving activity; it is the analyst's and the analysand's common effort to bring out from the latter's unconscious the non-sensical signifier which operates there as the signified *s* (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*), and to make sense out of it.

According to Lacan, such a non-sensical signifier is in fact what manifests itself as *gaze* that looks at the subject from the side of the Other. It—the signifier—looks at the subject while the subject sees itself as appears in the Other (its ideal image underpinned by meaning). Lacan in his seminar offers us a few salient examples of such a gaze: the skull looking back at the viewers from the bottom of Holbein's painting, *The*

³³ As for this aspect of the debate, Anika Lemaire's explanation is helpful. See chapter 8 and 9 of her *Jacques Lacan*.

Ambassadors, reminding them of their own death (*Se XI*, 85 ff); the butterfly in Choang-tsu's dream, which is Choang-tsu himself, but does not question its identity as the awake Choang-tsu does, because it is not caught in the symbolic spider-web of the society, but wholly disconnected from it (*Se XI*, 76); finally, the seven wolves sitting in the tree just outside the bedroom window looking back at the subject in the Wolf Man's dreams (*Ibid.*). "Their fascinated gaze," Lacan argues, "is the subject [itself]" (*Se XI*, 251). In other words, it is the primal-repressed binary signifier, which *is* the subject itself, that gazes back at the subject every time the subject sees its image in the Other. What interpretation does is to *cross* the signifying bar into the region of the signified, and to bring out from there the non-sensical signifying elements, and connect them back to the functioning network of other signifiers. In this sense, it is a movement of Odyssey in which the subject finally finds the return way home from the *vel* of alienation.

Immediately after the passage box-quoted above, Lacan adds, "In this same article, Leclaire's work illustrates particularly well the *crossing* of significant interpretation towards signifying non-sense . . ." (*Se XI*, 250; emphasis added). This is, as far as I know, the first time Lacan ever mentions in this seminar the term "crossing" (*franchissement*). Later in the concluding session for the whole seminar, Lacan opposes the concept of crossing to that of identification by saying that what he means by crossing is "the crossing of the plane of identification" (*Se XI*, 273). For this reason, commentators have claimed that the crossing here (sometimes translated as the "traversal"), is what lies beyond the logic of identification, or what should be viewed as an identification with *the real*. However, as we can see, the crossing that Lacan discusses here is intimately related

to the metaphoric operation of the Name-of-the-Father. If it is only through such an operation that the crossing is attained, then it is quite justifiable to suggest that the crossing does not imply a crossing of the plane of identification *as such*, but merely of a particular *imaginary* kind.

This suggestion can be all the more confirmed if we consider the fact that Lacan here is trying to refute his opponents (especially Laplanche) by pointing out that his metaphoric formula does not explain the primal repression, which is supposed to be achieved in the imaginary process of alienation, but the symbolic process of separation, in which the subject of the unconscious, the binary signifier, is more or less recovered or re-signified under the conditions specified by the function of the Name-of-the-Father. The transformed formula of the two pupils', according to Lacan, failed to distinguish between the imaginary order and the symbolic, as well as between the metonymical and the metaphorical. And, it is insofar as Lacan here is attempting to rebut his opponents' position by differentiating the imaginary and the symbolic that his idea of "crossing" (the crossing of the fundamental fantasy) cannot be construed as something that goes beyond the symbolic itself, or entails some sort of identification with the real. Toward the end of the second to last session, Lacan states:

But there is another function, which institutes *an identification of a strangely different kind*, and which is introduced by the process of *separation*. It is a question of this privileged object, discovered by analysis, of that object whose very reality is purely topological, of that object around which the drive moves, of that object that rises in a bump, like the wooden darning egg in the material which, in analysis, you are darning—the *objet a*. (*Se XI*, 257; emphasis added)

Everything, it seems, depends on how to interpret what Lacan here calls “an identification of a strangely different kind,” which is established through the process of separation. Is it a symbolic identification or a “real” identification with the object *a*? Suggesting that there is a “further separation” beyond a symbolic separation, Fink has interpreted the crossing of the fundamental fantasy as the subject’s act of traversing the lozenge within the formula of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$), and subsequently *assuming* the place of the cause—the object *a*.³⁴ According to him, it is through such an identification with the object *a*, *qua* the real, that the subject can take the responsibility for its own actions; now that it assumes the place of its own ethical “cause,” the subject is finally able to say “I did it” instead of “It happened to me.”³⁵ From my point of view, however, the subject’s identification with the object *a*, as we shall see, is precisely what defines the structure of *the Sadean perversion*. Insofar as Lacan in his conclusion upholds the Kantian idea of the moral law as his true doctrine, we should ask what still differentiates Kant from Sade, despite their disclosed affinity.

³⁴ This is also Žižek’s claim. He suggests that Christ is the ultimate answer for the question of the subject’s salvation because he is the one who becomes a “saint” by occupying “the place of *objet petit a*, of pure object, of somebody undergoing radical subjective destitution” (*SOI*, 116).

³⁵ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 62. Fink in footnote 15 (p. 186) offers as a textual support of his interpretation Lacan’s argument from another seminar, which says, “the analyst goes through the desire for this repositioning of the ego as subject in this *a* that I was for the desire of the Other, and no disentangling is possible of the enigma of my desire without this re-passing through the object *a*” (*Seminar XII*, June 16, 1965). However, Fink forgets to mention that Lacan also immediately warns readers by adding, “In effect there is a turning point of analysis where the subject remains *dangerously suspended* on this fact of encountering his truth in the object *a*. He may remain there, and one sees that” (*Ibid.*; emphasis added). As we shall see, such a dangerous suspension is exactly what Sade experiences in his perverse fantasy.

Kant contra Sade

It is true that in *Seminar XI* Lacan does not engage in an in-depth discussion of Kant and Sade. But, in his conclusion, he mentions “Kant with Sade,” the article he wrote just two years ago.³⁶ Notably, his reference to this article is followed by his brief, but significant, comment on the “paternal metaphor” (*Se XI*, 275-76). In this case, what Lacan stresses is not so much an affinity between Kant and Sade as their irreducible difference.

It is surely a surprising experience to read Lacan’s “Kant with Sade,” which seems to draw a parallel between Kant, arguably the strictest moral philosopher in history, and Sade, one of the most morally deviated figures. However, this initial surprise, I think, is as blinding as it is enlightening. Perhaps Kant’s furtive affinity with Sade has been somewhat overrated to the extent that their crucial difference, of which Lacan, I believe, is also in pursuit in that article, often passes unobserved. But, from the beginning, Lacan brings to the forefront his thesis that succinctly captures their difference as well as their affinity: “Sade represents here *the first step* of a subversion of which Kant . . . represents *the turning point*” (*EC*, 645; emphasis added).

What attracts Lacan’s attention most is that for Kant the moment of the emergence of the moral law paradoxically coincides with the moment of the disappearance of its very object. Kant defines the object of the moral law by sharply distinguishing between

³⁶ According to *Écrits*, the essay was written in September 1962, and published in the journal *Critique* (CXCI, April 1963); it served as a preface to Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*.

das Wohl and *das Gute*.³⁷ While *das Wohl* means “well-being,” and thus is related to objects of inclination, *das Gute*, the moral Good, which alone can be the pure object of the moral law, cannot be experienced by the subject as a phenomenal object. This difference is essential. Pre-Kantian moral philosophies were all perplexed by the arbitrary characteristics of *Das Wohl*. Although the subject might try to think of it according to the same logic of cause and effect that governs any other phenomenal objects, nonetheless it can never successfully establish a law of pleasure deserving such a name, because no phenomenon can claim a constant relationship to pleasure; depending on circumstances, one and the same object can quite differently affect the same subject (not to mention different subjects). Kant tries to put an end to such an embarrassment of moral philosophy by separating the moral Good from the pathological good. For him, the moral law can be established as a necessary universal law because its object, *das Gute*, is posited as unconditioned by any phenomenal objects. A judgment on the moral Good must be severed from all objects; it must be disinterested in the beneficial or unbeneficial effects they might bring to the subject. This is why the moral law should be presented in the form of a categorical, that is to say, *unconditional*, imperative.³⁸

However, a paradox arises for this very reason, according to Lacan: “it is at the very moment at which the subject no longer has any object before him that he encounters a

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, 3rd edition, trans. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 62.

³⁸ Of course, one can object that in his moral philosophy Kant still allows the subject to gain access to certain appropriate pathological goods. But this is possible only *after* the moral Good is defined in its purity without any reference to the pathological goods. Some pathological goods are allowed only insofar as they do not violate the universal maxim of the moral Good.

law that has no other phenomenon than something that is already signifying; the latter is obtained from a voice in conscience, which, articulating in the form of a maxim in conscience, proposes the order of a purely practical reason or will there” (*EC*, 647). In other words, while isolating the moral Good from the pathological good, Kant is constricted to relegate the object of the moral law, *das Gute*, to the “unthinkability of the thing in itself” (*EC*, 651). We only hear the “signifying” voice of conscience whose logic is formally articulated in a universal maxim of the moral law, but whose origin is unknown to us, despite the fact that it reverberates from the innermost place of our mind. Due to such a disappearance of the object, it remains inexplicable in Kant why we are drawn to the moral Good in the first place, why we “respect” the moral law, and do not consider it a mere matter of “gymnastic exercise” (*Se VII*, 79) of eliminating logical flaws or contradictions in a proposed moral maxim.

It is in this context that Lacan brings in Sade; it is in him that an opposite effect of Kant’s is achieved. The object of the Kantian moral law that vanishes into the unknowable realm of the thing in itself is clearly brought out by Sade as “the being-in-the-world, the *Dasein*, of the tormenting agent” (*EC*, 651), whose maxim consists in its claim for the universal right to *jouissance*. Lacan recapitulates the Sadean maxim as follows:

“I have the right to enjoy your body,” anyone can say to me, “and I will exercise this right without any limit to the capriciousness of the exactions I may wish to satiate with your body.” (*EC*, 648)

According to Lacan, this Sadean rule, which might seem to many no more than a black humor, deserves to be called a “categorical imperative” for two reasons. First, it

does not fail to follow the tenet of universal applicability of a maxim: everyone without exception has the right to enjoy others' bodies. Although it is not a reciprocal right, it is certainly a right that can be exercised in turns among all subjects. The logic behind it is not that of a mutual enjoyment, but that of "my turn next time!" (EC, 649) (it is for this reason that Lacan states the Sadean maxim in the form of: "anyone can say to me . . .") Nevertheless, Lacan argues this Sadean rule is a universally applicable one, and therefore satisfies a major criterion of the Kantian moral imperative. Secondly, the Sadean rule radically rejects any pathological good, because it aims at attaining no pleasure but pain. This, too, constitutes a point of convergence between Kant and Sade. Both of them go "beyond the pleasure principle" in their respective quest for the law of practice. Pain is not only what Sade presents to us as the horizon of desire; it is also the sole exceptional feeling or sentiment that Kant recognizes as a correlate of the moral law.³⁹

Thus, it becomes clear why Lacan wants to read Kant "with" Sade; it is because Sade, by retrieving in reality the missing object of the Kantian moral law, reveals the truth, blocked from Kant himself, that the moral law is still made of desire *qua* the will to jouissance; the drive that gives the material support to the moral law is surely not a pathological drive for pleasure, but still a drive *different in kind* which we may, after

³⁹ *Se VII*, 80; Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 76. However, one may suspect that Lacan here is conflating two things that Kant distinguishes: perfect duty and imperfect duty. According to this distinction, the Sadean maxim may not be universalized not because the "maxim cannot even be *conceived* as a universal law of nature without contradiction" but because it is "impossible to *will* that their maxim should be raised to the universality of a law of nature" (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton [New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1956], p. 91).

Freud, call the “death drive.” The gratification of this drive is the fundamental reason why we feel urged to follow the moral law.⁴⁰ Lacan writes:

Thus it is clearly Kant’s will that is encountered in the place of this will that can only be said to be a will to *jouissance* if we explain that it is the subject reconstituted through alienation at the cost of being nothing but the instrument of *jouissance*. Thus Kant, being interrogated “with Sade”—that is, Sade serving here, in our thinking as in his sadism, as an instrument—avows what is obvious in the question “What does he want?” which henceforth arises for everyone. (*EC*, 654).

Nonetheless, one should not be thereby mistaken to think that Lacan here is asserting Kant *is* Sade, or Sade advances much further than Kant in defining the nature of moral experience by proffering a certain solution for the latter’s theoretical difficulty. If he can indeed show the truth of Kant by choosing to retrieve in reality the missing object of the moral law, Sade in turn has to suffer an aporetic consequence that this very choice entails for him: namely, his own disappearance as a divided subject. If we can say it is the object that is missing in Kant, it is on the contrary *the subject* that is missing in Sade.

The position that Sade occupies in his perverse fantasy is no longer the position of the divided subject, but on the contrary that of the object-cause *a*. The formula for his fantasy thus appears as a *reversal* of the regular kind: $a \diamond \$$. In this formula, Sade (or the sadist) stands at the position of *a*, torturing his victim who is put to the position of the barred subject “enjoying” the pain. Sade thus reduces himself to a mere “instrument,” a torturing device, for the *jouissance* of the Other (the victim): “the sadist discharges the pain of existence into the Other, but without seeing that he himself thereby turns into an ‘eternal object’ . . .” (*EC*, p. 656). Hence, the structure of the Sadean perversion is

⁴⁰ See Andrew Cutrofello, *Continental Philosophy. A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 172-73.

essentially characterized by the subject's assuming the place of the cause, or its "real" identification with the object *a*. The effect of aphanisis, whose correlate is the division of the subject, is thus displaced onto the Other. The Sadean subject does not appear as disappearance; on the contrary, by "being object *a* in the fantasy and situating [itself] in the real" (*EC*, 654), the Sadean subject pushes back the moment of its own aphanisis *indefinitely*.

Sade surely enters the "sublime" space between the two deaths (that is, between the death of pleasure—pleasurable meaning—and the actual death). But his real purpose is to reside there indefinitely. Sade aims at stealing the experience of jouissance from the Other, while himself safely staying away from the destructive effects of the violence. This mode of aesthetic experience oddly fits the definition of "the sublime" (especially, the dynamical kind) that Kant offers in his *Critique of Judgment*.⁴¹ All of Sade's effort is put into extending such an aesthetic experience as indefinitely as possible. Lacan argues:

We will see that there is *a statics of the fantasy*, whereby the point of aphanisis, assumed to lie in \$, must in one's imagination be indefinitely pushed back. This explains the hardly believable survival that Sade grants to the victims of the abuse and tribulations he inflicts in his fable. (*EC*, 654; emphasis added)

Lacan points out, however, that this is exactly what makes Sade *fail* in leading us in the experience of jouissance or of its truth. While inflicting an infinite series of abuses and tribulations upon the Other, Sade still does not want to *sacrifice* or *murder* the Other. The process of torture becomes prolonged to such an extent that "the victim is bored to death" (*EC*, 664). All of this implies that for Sade it is of fundamental importance to

⁴¹ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), pp. 82-106.

preserve his fantasmatic relationship to the Other, that is, to the mOther. Instead of annihilating the mOther, Sade wants to continue to be the object *a* for her desire. Lacan concludes, “Raped and sewn shut—the mother remains prohibited” (*EC*, 667).

When the force of his maxim on the universal right to *jouissance* hits him back hard via someone else who declares, “Now, it’s my turn!”, Sade does not want to accept his own death, either. It is his mother-in-law, the President of Montreuil, who appeared in the moral force and obtained the *lettre de cachet* (King’s direct order of arrest and imprisonment, which cannot be appealed in the court of law). Sade was able to avoid arrest for years until his luck came to an end in 1777. He successfully appealed the death sentence in 1778, but remained imprisoned under the *lettre de cachet*. He was locked up in prison for thirty two years, corresponding to almost a half of his life. The rejection of the death penalty is also a theme repeated and theoretically elaborated in one of the texts he wrote after his release.⁴² Lacan argues that, despite his refusal of the Christian commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” Sade still remained within the boundary of Christian ethics; and this was manifestly revealed by his rejection of the death penalty, “one of the correlates of Charity.” Lacan writes, “Sade thus stopped at the point where desire and the law become bound up with each other” (*EC*, 667).

It is against this background that Lacan’s following remarks in his conclusion to *Seminar XI* should be understood:

⁴² Marquis de Sade, “Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans,” An Interlude of *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, in *Justine, Philosophy in the bedroom, and other writings*, trans. Richard Seaver & Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965), p. 310.

Experience shows us that Kant is more true [than Spinoza], and I have proved that his theory of conscience, when he writes of practical reason, is sustained only by giving a specification of the moral law which, looked at more closely, is simply desire in its pure state, that very desire that culminates in the sacrifice, strictly speaking, of everything that is the object of love in one's human tenderness—I would say, not only in the rejection of the pathological object, but also in its sacrifice and murder. That is why I wrote *Kant avec Sade*. (*Se XI*, 275-76; translation modified).

Therefore, the ultimate difference between Kant and Sade, which makes Lacan in his article articulate that Sade represents only “the first step” of the subversion, while Kant its “turning point,” consists in the fact that it is Kant, and not Sade, who was able to bring desire and the law together by not hesitating to mutilate the Other in order to take out from him or her the object *a*, which constitutes in the Other what is more than the Other, the surplus whose dignity must be respected most (“I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the objet petit *a*—I mutilate you”: *Se XI*, 263).

This Kantian separation of the *a* from the Other is what Lacan in the last resort upholds as his true doctrine, because, according to him, “the fundamental mainspring of the analytic operation is the maintenance of the distance between the I and the *a*” (*Se XI*, 273). What Lacan calls “the I” here is not the *je* or the *moi* in French, but “the idealizing capital I of identification” (*Se XI*, 272), that is to say, *the ego ideal*. Lacan also specifies that “the *objet a* may be identical with the gaze” (*Ibid.*), which, as we already discussed, is nothing other than the binary signifier that looks back at the subject from the side of the Other (the I, the mOther).⁴³ The maintenance of the distance between the I and the *a*

⁴³ Strictly speaking, the object *a* is not exactly the same as the binary signifier, because the former is rather what fills the vacant place from which the latter is missing. In this sense, we may say that the binary

is possible only through the intervention of the Name or the *No* of the Father, because his *No* represents the law of a pure symbolic origin. The symbolic law must substitute itself for the I (the arbitrary master signifier), and have it struck down into the nether region of the psyche. What Sade, in contrast to Kant, did not or could not achieve due to his “oblique acceptance of the Law” (*EC*, 667) was this very sacrifice of the I. Ironically, Sade’s extraordinary cruelty was *the result of the evasion of the ultimate sacrifice and murder of the Other (the mOther)*. To avoid her loss, he dissects her body into numerous parts, and attacks them piece by piece in an infinitely “boring” process of torture.⁴⁴

Lacan continues:

If the transference is that which separates demand from the drive, the analyst’s desire is that which brings it back. And in this way, it isolates the *a*, places it at the greatest possible distance from the I that he, the analyst, is called upon by the subject to embody. *It is from this idealization that the analyst has to fall* in order to be the support of the separating *a*, in so far as his desire allows him, in an upside-down hypnosis, to embody the hypnotized patient. This *crossing* of the plane of identification is possible. (*Se XI*, 273; emphasis added)

signifier (S_2) is the *truth* of the object *a* (rather than the *a* itself). This interpretation can be confirmed by Lacan’s formula for the “analytic discourse” presented in *Seminar XVII*, which places the S_2 right under the *a* in the common fraction appearing on the left side:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \underline{a} & \rightarrow & \underline{\$} \\ S_2 & & S_1 \end{array}$$

As is well known, what is at the bottom left position of the formula structurally represents the “truth” of what is on top of it. See Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII)*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 29.

⁴⁴ This seems to be closely related to the theme of the surviving mother who continues to return unharmed despite the child’s (imaginary) assaults on her. Lacan here is perhaps offering a criticism of Donald Winnicott, who sees the surviving mother as providing an important foundation for the child’s stable psychic development.

To visualize things in a more tangible manner, we can say that the role played by the analyst is equivalent to that of the mOther, because, as Lacan will soon say, “the analyst’s desire is not a pure desire” (*Se XI*, 276), but an impure mixture of the imaginary and the symbolic. In due course of the analysis, the analyst embodying the mOther must *fall* from the place of the I in order to become the underpinning of the separating *a* (thus, the binary signifier and the subject itself). Therefore, if the entire operation called separation can yield its positive results only through the formation of the “paternal metaphor” (*Se XI*, 276), it seems to me far more than justifiable to suggest that the fundamental structure of Lacan’s theory remains *unchanged* in *Seminar XI*. His concept of separation does not constitute a rupture from his previous theory, but only a continued unfolding and development of it.

The Rupture in Seminar XX and Its Consequences

At the beginning of *Encore* (*Seminar XX*), Lacan simply indicates that he has a little more to add to the seminar he previously did thirteen years ago with the title, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (*Seminar VII*). “With the passage of time,” says he, “I learned that I could say a little more about it” (*Se XX*, 1). One might think at first that this “little more,” insofar as it is what he says it is, should not be such a big deal. He just wants to add a little more. That’s all—that should be all. And yet this “little more,” as we shall see, is not something one can definitely add and be done with. It returns *encore* and *encore* precisely as “a little more,” as what still needs to be added. One cannot finish adding it because it is also “not-all” (*pas-tout*), because one is adding “not-all.”

In another passage found roughly a half way through the seminar, Lacan says again (*encore*), with a bit more boldness this time: “Today, of all the seminars that someone else is going to bring out [in a written form], it [*Seminar VII*] is perhaps the only one I will rewrite myself and make into a written text” (*Se XX*, 53). Hence, it is not just “a little more” that he wants to add to that old seminar; rather, he wants to re-write the whole thing. Still, this rewriting, he says, is specific to *Seminar VII*. It is this particular seminar, and not the others, that he says he wants to rewrite. And yet (*encore*), in his concluding session (session XI), he finally breaks his mind to us, after having thus hesitated with so many *encore*’s of his own: “With this title, *Encore*, I wasn’t sure, I must admit, that I was still in the field I have cleared for twenty years, since what it said was that it could still (*encore*) go on a long time” (*Se XX*, 137). Hence, although it is true that *Seminar VII* is what constitutes a focal point of the change Lacan wants to make insofar as it is the seminar in which he discussed the question of woman in depth, nevertheless it is not just *Seminar VII*, but *the entire field he has cleared for twenty years*, that undergoes a profound change in this seminar titled *Encore*. It is to this extent that we might want to consider calling whatever happens in this seminar, a rupture that is incomparable to any other changes we may find along the line of development of Lacan’s thoughts. In fact, I would like to claim that this is the *sole* rupture deserving such a name we may find in him. What, then, does this rupture consist in? What is it that brings it about? Exactly what is going on in this seminar that makes Lacan, at the age of seventy one with less than ten years left to live (though he did not know), decide to change everything?

There are two major themes that Lacan weaves together throughout *Seminar XX*: love and writing. We will first discuss love, and then, writing. Afterwards, we will approach the nature of the rupture in *Seminar XX* by examining the relationship between the two.

The title *Encore* bears a close relationship to the question of love:

Jouissance—jouissance of the Other’s body—remains a question, because the answer it [love] may constitute is not necessary. We can take this further still: it is not a sufficient answer either, because love demands love. It never stops (*ne cesse pas*) demanding it. It demands it . . . *encore*. “Encore” is the proper name of the gap (*faille*) in the Other from which the demand for love stems. (*Se XX*, 4).

Why does love not stop demanding love? It is because one cannot close the gap of desire in the Other—“the Other sex”—through love. Love is something marked by this fundamental inability. Lacan says, “Love is impotent” (*Se XX*, 6), even if this very impotence is what helps love to go on, sustaining and reproducing itself. “Love is impotent,” because, while it is the name given to a desire to be one with the Other sex, it is impossible to establish a relationship with it: “there is no such thing as a sexual relationship [*il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*]” (*Se XX*, 12).

Is there really no such thing as a sexual relationship? Do we not see people having sexual relationships with each other? After all, people love and make love all the time. Why does Lacan then say that it is impossible to establish a relationship between two sexes? Fink suggests that Lacan’s thesis merely implies there is no “direct” relationship between them. Man only has a “masturbatory” desire toward woman, a self-relating, and therefore non-relational, desire toward her; he deals with her merely as an object, as a

signifier, but not as a subject.⁴⁵ In this watered-down version of Lacan's thesis (watered-down because the original thesis does not merely say that there is no direct sexual relationship, but that there is no sexual relationship *at all*), man's masturbatory mode of desire appears to be what is ultimately responsible for the absence of sexual relationship. It is true that, for Lacan, man and woman (and child too) are not prediscursive realities but signifiers (*Se XX*, 33); they relate to each other as signifiers. But this way of relating is not just man's. Woman, too, relates to man as a signifier. Lacan says, "A man is nothing but a signifier. A woman seeks out a man qua signifier" (*Ibid.*). In fact, I think that, if they all related to each other only and strictly as a signifier, then Lacan would certainly maintain that, however indirect, there *is* such a thing as a sexual relationship (I will return to this point soon).

The fundamental reason for the impasse of establishing a sexual relationship rather seems to be found in the fact that there is something extra in the Other sex—woman—that radically goes beyond the limit of phallic jouissance: "woman is defined . . . as "not whole" (*pas-tout*) with respect to phallic jouissance . . . Phallic jouissance is the obstacle owing to which man does not come . . . to enjoy woman's body, precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ" (*Se XX*, 7). Lacan illustrates such a limit of phallic jouissance via Zeno's paradox concerning the race between Achilles and a tortoise; he points out that man, like Achilles, can never catch up with woman, because she, like the tortoise, advances a little further every time he takes a step after her. "She is "not whole", not wholly his. Some remains" (*Se XX*, 8). Man cannot simply add this remaining

⁴⁵ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, pp. 104-07.

“some” to his side and finally catch up with her. He can surely *pass* her because he is faster, but this does not mean that he can *catch up with* her. If he tries to do the latter, he may do so only at infinity. The gap between man and his Other—woman—is not closable, because it does not just lie between them but also and fundamentally *in* the Other (“‘Encore’ is the proper name of the gap (*faille*) in the Other”; *Se XX*, 4). Woman is defined or rather *undefined* by this gap in her between the phallic jouissance and the Other “feminine” jouissance.

A question remains, however: even so, why can we not say that there is a sexual relationship between the two sexes? Just because there is something else that only concerns woman, does it necessarily mean that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship? Why can we not say that there is a sexual relationship *and* there is something else as well? Why does Lacan have to posit so bluntly that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship? Is it not too strong a thesis? Lacan clearly says that “jouissance, qua sexual, is phallic” (*Se XX*, 9), thereby implying that the Other feminine jouissance, if there is such a thing, is “asexual” in nature, basically having nothing to do with sex. Why can’t the existence of a phallic relationship alone justify our saying that there is a sexual relationship? Is woman not interested in sex? This is surely not the case, since Lacan argues that woman, albeit in a different way from man’s, is fully present in such a phallic function: “She has different ways of approaching that phallus and of keeping it for herself. It’s not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is not not at all there. She is there in full (*à plein*). But there is something more (*en plus*)” (*Se XX*, 74).

To find a key to this riddle, we must examine the other major theme of the seminar: writing. According to Lacan, speaking and writing are two different things. The spoken is the signifier, while the written is the letter. The letter is not invented to simply write down what is spoken, the signifier. What is it invented for, then? Referring to “a certain Sir Flinders Petrie,” Lacan argues,

. . . the letters of the Phoenician alphabet existed well before the time of Phoenicia on small Egyptian pottery where they served as manufacturers’ marks. That means that the letter first emerged from *the market*, which is typically an effect of *discourse*, before anyone dreamt of using letters to do what? Something that has nothing to do with the connotation of the signifier, but that elaborates and perfects it. (Se XX, 36; emphasis added)

Hence, the written, which is the letter, was first and foremost invented to record the goods that come in and go out in exchange with other goods in market.⁴⁶ It was used to *count and measure* things in exchange. The letter, for this reason, is essentially characterized as what can be arranged, formalized and structured in a mathematical or scientific formula. Take, for instance, $F = ma$ or $E = mc^2$. These formulas all express certain formal relations among letters (variables). Though writing is not a metalanguage, nevertheless Lacan says it is what nearly approaches it: “one can make it fulfill a function that resembles [metalanguage]” (Se XX, 122). Writing, in other words, has a pure symbolic nature, insofar as the symbolic is understood as what formulaically structures all the circulations of goods and messages among members of society. Strictly speaking, the symbolic does not simply concern language, but *language in exchange*. It concerns

⁴⁶ This is also what historians of ancient Greece testify. Not only the letter system named linear B, which forms the origin of alphabet, but also the linear A are all used for recording economic transactions. See Thomas R. Martin, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 24 ff.

discourse. “The notion of discourse,” Lacan argues, “should be taken as a social link (*lien social*), founded on language” (*Se XX*, 17), “a link between those who speak” (*Se XX*, 30). Of course, this is not to say that the written itself, namely the letter, is something symbolic. To the contrary, the letter is something *real* as long as it articulates the non-sensical material phonemic structure of the signifier, that is, the signifier-ness of the signifier utterly divorced from the signified. But what Lacan equally stresses is that the letter is also what is “borrowed” by discourse, and thus *combined with the symbolic*. The letter becomes effective (or effected), only when it is integrated into the symbolic structure. Thus Lacan argues, “The letter is, radically speaking, an effect of discourse” (*Se XX*, 36).

Lorenzo Chiesa in his *Subjectivity and Otherness* rightly emphasizes that the letter is “the real” of the signifier. He argues that “a letter is nothing but a signifier as it materially exists per se in the unconscious, independently of its effects of (conscious) signification . . . In other words, a letter is a meaningless signifier, the *real* structure of language.”⁴⁷ In his earlier essay, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Lacan himself confirms this view:

These elements, the decisive discovery of linguistics, are *phonemes*; we must not look for any phonetic constancy in the modulatory variability to which this term applies, but rather for the synchronic system of differential couplings that are necessary to discern vocables in a given language. This allows us to see that an essential element in speech itself was predestined to flow into moveable type which, in Didots or Garamonds squeezing into lower-cases, renders validly present what I call the “letter”—namely, *the essentially localized structure of the signifier*. (*EC*, 418; emphasis added)

⁴⁷ Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness*, p. 57.

However, Chiesa does not pay attention to another crucial aspect of the letter, which in fact constitutes a half of its definition that Lacan presents at the beginning of the same essay. “By ‘letter’,” Lacan says, “I designate the material medium [*support*] that concrete discourse borrows from language” (*EC*, 413). The letter is not just defined as a phoneme but a phoneme combined in discourse with the symbolic law. It is through such a combination that the letter becomes in the unconscious the instance that represents *a mathematical or scientific necessity*. The singular example that Lacan finds to illustrate such a combination, of course, is given nowhere other than in our experiences of *metaphor*.

The effect of metaphor, as we already discussed in chapter 1, is achieved through a substitutive operation that occurs at the level of phoneme. The existence of one or more phonemes shared by two totally heterogeneous terms (*atterrir* and *terreur*, for instance) allows the subject to break a path between them and perform a poetic condensation which generates a new meaning attached to the consequential neologism (*atterré*). It is by means of such a metaphoric operation that the paternal symbolic law is established as *a necessary law*, unswayed by the arbitrary metonymical law of the mOther. The metaphor called “Name-of-the-Father,” which substitutes itself for the Desire-of-the-Mother, is just what works here as a guarantor of such a necessity; depending on it, the subject should be able to successfully separate itself from the despotic will of the mOther and thus gain certain individual autonomy.

Thus we understand now why the whole title of Lacan’s essay in question does not simply read “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” but also includes as its

subtitle: “or Reason since Freud.” The letter represents “reason,” insofar as it serves to effectuate a law which would be as necessary as any other *scientific* law, a law that would never betray the subject by failing to generate a meaning *enjoyable* to it. What the title of Lacan’s essay wants to indicate is that psychoanalysis would not have become a science as we know of it today if Freud had fallen short of theorizing this fundamental operation of metaphor that combines the real (the jouissance of the letter) with the symbolic (the law).

Yet, it is precisely such a necessity of the metaphor called “Name-of-the-Father” that Lacan questions in *Seminar XX* by recognizing the existence of “feminine” jouissance. The only jouissance that the subject is permitted to access under the rule of the paternal symbolic law is phallic jouissance. Hence, to recognize feminine jouissance is in effect to consider the law no longer necessary. This is ultimately what Lacan means by his formulation, “there is no such thing as a sexual relationship.” He says,

I have been drumming [the formulation] into you for quite some time. But drumming it into you, I must nevertheless *explain* it—it is based only on the written in the sense that *the sexual relationship cannot be written (ne peut pas s’écrire)*. Everything that is written stems from the fact that it will forever be impossible to write, as such, the sexual relationship (*Se XX*, 35; emphasis added).

Therefore, when Lacan says there is no such thing as a sexual relationship, he does not mean that no sexual *intercourse* is possible between the two sexes. Not only is such an intercourse possible between them; it is also possible for them to achieve together a certain kind of jouissance (they surely from time to time experience orgasms). Lacan does not even mean that there is only an indirect sexual relationship in which one sex (supposedly man) relates to the other merely as a signifier. Being direct or indirect does

not matter here, because what matters is the fact that the sexual relationship cannot be written. Why can it not be written? Lacan answers: “Now you’ll never be able to write the sexual relationship—write it with true writing (*écrit*), insofar as the written is the aspect of language that is conditioned by a *discourse*” (*Se XX*, 35-36, emphasis added), that is, a discourse whose function is to combine the letter with the *necessary* symbolic law. Therefore what Lacan means is this and only this: that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship *because it can never be written as a “relationship” in a (quasi)mathematical formula in such a way that the necessary working of it is guaranteed.*

The usual English translation of the formulation in question unwittingly tends to obscure Lacan’s intention behind it. In this context, it is a better idea to refer to its original French version, which reads, “*Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel.*” Lacan uses the verb “*avoir*” (to have) instead of “*être*” (to be) or “*exister*” (to exist), thereby implying that it is from the point of view of *the symbolic law* that a sexual relationship becomes lost (as we discussed in chapter 1, “*avoir*” always belongs to the symbolic, while “*être*” and “*exister*” belong to the imaginary and the real respectively). Here we may return to the question we previously raised: why can we not say that there is a sexual relationship, and then there is something else as well that concerns only woman? The reason why we cannot say so is that this “something else” is not just there indifferently next to the sexual relationship; but it is there precisely as what constitutes *an exception* to the very law of sexual relationship; it is what makes the law ultimately fail *as a law*. A law that sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t is not really a universal law; at most it can be a particular law whose status would not be so distinguishable from that of the arbitrary law

of the mOther. There is no such thing as a sexual relationship because it cannot be written as a symbolic law possessed of *a scientific necessity*.

Hence, we can also confirm, opposing Fink's claim, that, if men and women can relate to each other strictly as *signifiers*, there would certainly be such a thing as a sexual relationship; in this case the law of sexual relationship, no matter how indirect it is, could be written in stone and work like a charm, because every subject, male or female, would follow it without an exception. It is insofar as "there is no such thing as Woman" (*Se XX*, 71 ff) or "Woman . . . does not exist"⁴⁸ that a sexual relationship breaks down. It breaks down because the symbolic law which is supposed to necessitate the relationship with "her" becomes inoperative. From this point of view, it is not man who is responsible for the absence of a sexual relationship. However problematic his masturbatory mode of relating to the Other sex is, man is the one who blindly abides by the symbolic law to the end. It is woman or rather women who sometimes reject the phallic jouissance offered by the symbolic law, and go "frigid" (as we often see in clinical cases of hysterics; *Se XX*, 75 and 85). Of course, it does not mean that women are to blame for such a failure. It is just the way it is between the two sexes or rather the way in which there is no such thing as a sexual relationship, according to Lacan.

Discussing the issue of necessity, Lacan distinguishes three logical categories: the necessary, the contingent and the impossible. He argues that the opposite of the necessary is not the contingent, but the impossible. He defines the necessary as "that which doesn't

⁴⁸ Lacan, *Television*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier *et al.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 134.

stop being written,” while defining the impossible as “that which doesn’t stop not being written” (*Se XX*, 59). The necessary, as we saw above, is identified by Lacan with the symbolic (at least prior to *Seminar XX*), because the latter is understood as a scientific formula representing the structure of discursive communication (social link) between subjects. The impossible, on the other hand, is identified with the real; it is what can never be written in all circumstances. Writing and the real, in this sense, are two categories totally opposed to each other.⁴⁹ But, as Lacan now wants to specify, what can be written is further divided into two subcategories: first, what is written necessarily, and second, what is written contingently and yet for this reason *can stop being written anytime*. Lacan clarifies:

Let me remind you what I base this term “contingency” on. The phallus—as analysis takes it up as the pivotal of extreme point of what is enunciated as the cause of desire—analytic experience stops not writing it. It is in this “stops not being written” (*cesse de ne pas s’écrire*) that resides the apex of what I have called contingency . . . The necessary is introduced to us by the “doesn’t stop” (*ne cesse pas*). The “doesn’t stop” of the necessary is the “doesn’t stop being written” (*ne cesse pas de s’écrire*). *Analysis of the reference to the phallus apparently leads us to this necessity*. The “doesn’t stop not being written,” on the contrary, is the impossible, as I define it on the basis of the fact that it cannot in any case be written, and it is with this that I characterize the sexual relationship—the sexual relationship doesn’t stop not being written. *Because of this, the apparent necessity of the phallic function turns out to be mere contingency. It is as a mode of the contingent that the phallic function stops not being written.* (*Se XX*, 94; emphasis added)

Hence, while the necessary is what doesn’t stop being written, the contingent is what merely stops not being written. Both categories are explained and differentiated in terms

⁴⁹ Some theorists, referring to Lacan, have tried to define the real as *both* necessary *and* impossible. However, in Lacan’s view, it is just oxymoronic to say the real is both. Lacan explicitly says, “the necessary is not the real” (*Se XX*, 144). For example, see Ernesto Laclau’s essays in E. Laclau, J. Butler, and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality* (London: Verso, 2000).

of their relations to the function of the phallus. The phallic function was deemed necessary in the past, but now is deemed contingent by Lacan. Crucial here is the fact that Lacan does not simply define the necessary as what doesn't stop *happening*; he deliberately chooses to define it as what doesn't stop *being written*. What is written, of course, is a letter (*lettre*); but we must consider it *in its double sense*. It is not only a letter written down on a piece of paper as a structure of a signifier, but also *posted and expected to be delivered to its destination*, because it is, as we have insisted, what is borrowed by a discourse *qua* a social link between subjects. If it is necessary, "a letter always arrives at its destination," as Lacan argued in his much earlier "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in 1955 (*EC*, 30). But if it is contingent (and Lacan now says it is), a letter does not always arrive at its destination. It does arrive sometimes, but not always.⁵⁰

Therefore, we are absolutely justified in saying that it is in *Seminar XX* and *no earlier than this* that Lacan reverses his *structuralist* thesis that a letter always arrives at its destination. In the early Lacan, the necessary arrival of a letter was guaranteed by the symbolic structure. A letter *qua* a non-sensical phonemic "real" of the signifier (*jouissance*) could always be considered to arrive at its destination insofar as it was successfully combined with the necessary symbolic structure that regulated social links between subjects (the paths of mail delivery). The letter in this sense was nothing other

⁵⁰ In "Complement" to his first session, Lacan in fact reminds us that it is the "Seminar on 'the Purloined Letter'" that is at issue in this seminar. He says, "It seems that in his first 'seminar', as it is called, of the year Lacan spoke . . . of nothing less than love. The news has traveled . . . it came back to me . . . [But] I spoke of the *love letter* (*la lettre d'amour*), of the declaration of love—not the same thing as the word of love (*la parole d'amour*)" (*Se XX*, 11-12, emphasis added). Obviously, the first seminar which Lacan talks about here is not the 1953-54 seminar, but the "Seminar on 'The Purloined letter,'" which is not included in the actual series of *Seminars*.

than the metaphor called “Name-of-the-Father,” which condensed in itself the phallic function that could never fail to work for the subject. This was the most fundamental and irreversible thesis of Lacan’s. But now he is admitting that the phallic function can stop working or stop being written again, because it is merely contingent.

It is well known that in his essay, “*Le Facteur de la vérité* [The Deliverer of Truth],” Jacques Derrida criticized Lacan’s “Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”” for what he termed a “phallogocentrism” (i.e. a phallus-logos-centrism); in essence, he argued that a letter did not always arrive at its destination. It was in 1975 that he made this criticism, and therefore, according to my reading, it was preceded by Lacan’s own self-criticism by three years or so.⁵¹ However, Lacan’s self-criticism itself was preceded by a similar criticism of Althusser’s, which was probably made in the 1960s. In his autobiography, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, Althusser recollects an episode involving himself, Lacan and a young Hindu doctor, and writes:

I thought about ‘letters’ which, although posted, do not always reach the addressee. One day I happened to read a remark of Lacan’s to the effect that: ‘A letter always reaches its addressee.’ It came as a surprise! But the issue was complicated by a young Hindu doctor who underwent a short analysis with Lacan and was bold enough to ask him at the end: ‘You say a letter always reaches its addressee. Althusser, however, says exactly the opposite. What are your views of what he calls

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, “*Le Facteur de la vérité*,” *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 411-496. However, one may argue that Derrida’s criticism of Lacan’s thesis on the letter already began to develop in 1966 when they first encountered each other in the conference that took place in Baltimore. See Derrida, “For the Love of Lacan,” *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 39-69. It is well known that Žižek later tried to defend Lacan against Derrida’s criticism in his essay, “Why Does a Letter Always Arrive at Its Destination?,” *Enjoy Your Symptom!—Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1-30. Žižek’s basic argument is that a letter always arrives at its destination because it is retroactively constituted as a letter only after it arrives at its destination. This is indeed a “clever” argument. But I hope it is clear by now that Lacan himself was the first one who admitted that a letter does not always arrive at its destination precisely because the phallic function does not always succeed in delivering the letter to its destination.

his materialist argument?’ Lacan thought about it for ten whole minutes and then simply said: ‘Althusser isn’t a practicing analyst.’⁵²

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Althusser questions Lacan’s notion of the symbolic because he thinks that a complete transition from the imaginary order to the symbolic never takes place; it is impossible to fully separate the latter from the former. On the other hand, when Lacan in his “Seminar on “the Purloined Letter”” says “a letter always arrives at its destination,” he is able to say so because he believes in this possibility of obtaining the pure and universal symbolic law working unhindered by the intervening effects of the imaginary. It is this belief that he now wants to discard in *Seminar XX*. It is Lacan, in other words, who later makes a fundamental change to his position and thus in a sense *converges with Althusser*.

Why does Lacan change his position? The reason, of course, lies in his recognition of the existence of feminine jouissance. If there are a certain group of subjects who can still access the kind of jouissance disallowed by the symbolic law, then the very law can no longer be considered universal; on the contrary, it is particular and arbitrary. Thus Lacan in *Seminar XX* calls the phallic jouissance “the jouissance of the idiot” (*Se XX*, 81). It does not simply mean that it is stupid, but also and more importantly, that it is *particular*. Lacan argues:

Analytic experience encounters its terminus (*terme*) here, for the only thing it can produce, according to my writing (*gramme*), is S_1 . I think you still remember the clamor I managed to stir up last time by designating this signifier, S_1 , as the signifier of even the most idiotic jouissance—in the two senses of the term, the idiot’s

⁵² Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, trans. Richard Veasey (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 187.

jouissance, which certainly functions as a reference here, and also the oddest jouissance. (*Se XX*, 94).

Fink, as the translator of *Seminar XX*, attaches to this passage a footnote that provides us with an additional piece of information, this time quite suitably: “The Greek root of “idiot,” *ιδιότης*, means “particular” or “peculiar”” (Ibid.) In other words, the symbolic law supported by the phallic jouissance does not have a universal applicability. As Lacan insists, it still concerns both man and woman; but woman has something else that goes beyond it.⁵³ It is for this reason that the binding of jouissance through the symbolic law becomes loose from time to time, thereby letting a letter (a “love letter”) get lost on its path of delivery.

Hence, I think that, if there is a passage Lacan would particularly want to rewrite in *Seminar VII*, it ought to be one like this:

The space of comedy is created by the presence at its center of a hidden signifier . . . the phallus. Who cares if it is subsequently whisked away? One must simply remember that the element in comedy that satisfies us, the element that makes us laugh, that makes us appreciate it in its full human dimension, not excluding the unconscious, is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, including precisely those that are the most essential, those that are constituted by the agency of the signifier. *The phallus is nothing more than a signifier, the signifier of this flight. Life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens.* If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives. (*Se VII*, 324; emphasis added).

As we know, it is through a comic effect of joke (*Witz*) produced by a substitution of a signifier for another that the pure symbolic order of the father is instituted in place of the imaginary order of the mOther. Once it is established in this way as the sole support

⁵³ According to Lacan, there isn't a woman who is not submitted to the phallic function. But, at the same time, not-whole of woman is submitted to it. A part of woman (not in the sense of some women, but in the sense of a part of every single woman) escapes it.

of the symbolic law, the phallus becomes invincible, so invincible that it never fails just as the comic hero never does. In what does it never fail? It never fails in evoking a desire, because it never fails to escape in front of the subject's eyes. The phallus, in this sense, becomes a *necessary cause of desire*. At least, this is what Lacan believed until he realized that woman sometimes out of blue went frigid, as if the phallus meant nothing to her, as if she were not interested in sex but in something else, that is, something asexual, mysterious and divine (as we see in Antigone or St. Teresa, who is not interested in love or marriage but only in what Lacan calls "soulove," a spiritual love of God). Thus, Freud's old question, "*Was will das Weib?* (What does Woman want?)," or Lacan's own question, "*Che Vuoi?* (What does the Other wants?)," is recovered as the ultimate conundrum before which psychoanalysis, once again, proves incompetent in providing a necessary (that is, scientific) answer.

One might wonder: does this mean that, prior to *Seminar XX*, Lacan actually believed in such an ability of psychoanalysis to solve the mystery of sexual difference? His texts testify he did. In his conclusion to *Seminar XI*, Lacan argues:

Love, which, it seems to some, I have down-graded, can be posited only in that beyond, where, at first, it renounces its object. This also enables us to understand that any shelter in which may be established *a viable, temperate relation of one sex to the other* necessitates the intervention—this is what psychoanalysis teaches us—of that medium known as the *paternal metaphor* (*Se XI*, 276; emphasis added).

Not only does Lacan here claim that there *is* a sexual relationship, which is moreover viable and temperate, but also that such a sexual relationship can be established only through the intervention of the paternal metaphor. He points out that this is the essential lesson that psychoanalysis teaches us. Lacan's position here is exactly the

opposite of *Seminar XX*. He claims that, although it is true that he downgraded certain love, he nevertheless did not refuse love in its entirety. Surely there is a special kind of love that is possible and ought to be learned by the subject; it is love that he or she can practice within the boundary of the symbolic law.

What Lacan's essay, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," tells us about love amounts to the same thing. He says, "[The metaphor,] 'Love is a pebble laughing in the sun,' recreates love in a dimension that I have said strikes me as tenable, as opposed to its ever imminent slippage into the mirage of some narcissistic altruism" (*EC* 423). There is an imaginary love, and then there is a symbolic one; these two loves are different in kind. It is the symbolic love (or the love practiced within the limit of the symbolic law) that psychoanalysis upholds against the narcissistic imaginary love untiringly promoted by ego-psychology. By differentiating the two kinds of love, one can liberate love from its own ambivalent effects; love no longer slips back into its opposite—hatred—when it is metaphorically recreated as "a pebble laughing in the sun." This joyous "laughing" is as enduring as a hard piece of pebble, insofar as it arises out of an unequivocal separation of the symbolic from the imaginary.

This tenability of the symbolic love, however, is just what Lacan puts into question in *Seminar XX*. He argues, "All love, subsisting only on the basis of the 'stop not being written,' tends to make the negation [that is, love *qua* the negation of the impossibility of sexual relationship] shift to the 'doesn't stop being written,' doesn't stop, won't stop. Such is the substitute that . . . constitutes the destiny as well as the drama of love" (*Se XX*, 145). In other words, all love tries to turn itself into a necessity, an eternal love that,

against all odds, never fails to “arrive at its destination.” However, since love is not based on the necessary but merely on the contingent (“stop not being written”), even the truest kind of love cannot sustain its romantic drama till the end. Sooner or later, *all* love regresses into hatred. Lacan concludes: “Doesn’t the extreme of love, true love, reside in the approach to being? . . . [T]rue love gives way to hatred” (*Se XX*, 146).

Probably not knowing that Lacan underwent such a rupture in *Seminar XX*, Althusser writes in his “The Discovery of Dr. Freud” (1976):

To finish things, however, I would like to return to what I said earlier, namely, that Freud could not claim—*because he knew* that he could not do it—to have produced a *scientific* theory of the unconscious. That recognition is everywhere inscribed in Freud’s work, and if I may say so, is *spelled out*, which quite proves that *the letters thus spelled out did not arrive at their destined recipients* and that in particular, Lacan, who claims some expertise when it comes to letters and recipients, did not receive his, which was lost in transit, even if he had it under his eyes.⁵⁴

Well, to be fair, Lacan did receive such letters from Freud, which spelled out precisely that letters did not always arrive at their destinations; in effect he came to agree with Althusser and acknowledge that psychoanalysis was not a science. Lacan not only abandoned his belief in the necessity of the symbolic law but therewith *his conviction concerning the status of psychoanalysis as a science* as well. This is why Lacan began to search for another way to do psychoanalysis or to do what one might want to call a post-psychoanalysis. In *Seminar XXIII* on *Le sinthome*, Lacan turns his attention toward literature—more precisely, James Joyce’s literary works—not to find examples illustrating the scientific truth of psychoanalysis but on the contrary to encounter *singular* truths that psychoanalysis could not reach with its scientific laws.

⁵⁴ Althusser, “The Tbilisi Affair,” *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, p. 102 (emphasis added).

What is *sinthome*? As is well known, it is an archaic form of writing *symptôme*. It is usually thought of by Lacanian scholars as a remainder of the real which cannot ultimately be removed by an analysis, and therefore, with which the subject must identify at the end of the analysis after it crosses the fundamental fantasy (for instance, see Žižek, *SOI*, 74-75). However, throughout *Seminar XXIII*, we cannot really locate such an account, which specifically relates sinthome to the aftermath of the subject's crossing of the fantasy.⁵⁵ Although it is true that Lacan considers sinthome as not analyzable (*Sf XXIII*, 125), this aspect alone can hardly explain what sinthome is, nor why he needs it in addition to the old concept of symptom.⁵⁶

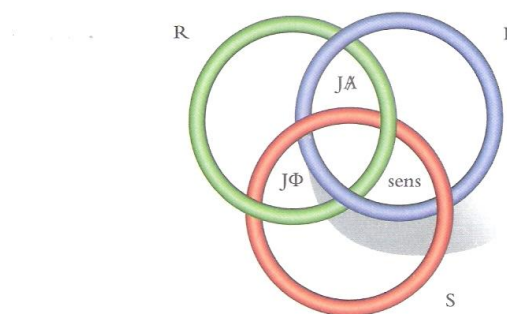


Fig. 9. The Borromean Knot of the RSI Schema (*Sf XXIII*, 48)

⁵⁵ Roberto Harrari's interpretation somewhat differs in that he distinguishes the identification with the sinthome from the traversal of fantasy, while proposing the former as a new way of ending analysis replacing the latter. See R. Harrari, *How James Joyce Made His Name: A Reading of the Final Lacan*, trans. Luke Thurston (New York: Other Press, 2002), pp. 119-20. Harrari's account clearly has a merit of not confusing sinthome with the traversal of fantasy; however, I was unable to locate in *Seminar XXIII* or other unpublished seminars around it such an account which specifically defined the identification with the sinthome as the end of analysis. Since I did not go over all the unpublished documents of Lacan's, I suspect that it is possible that he might have said such a thing. But I still think that his major focus concerning the question of sinthome, as we shall see, lies somewhere else than in defining the end of analysis.

⁵⁶ Although he also characterizes sinthome mainly through its unanalyzability, Evans still points out that Lacan's concept of symptom in the 1960s already had such a property of unanalyzability (see *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 188-89). Hence, from my point of view, this property alone does not really explain the need or the specificity of the concept of sinthome.

According to Lacan, sinthome is rather defined as what can serve to *repair* the borromean knot when the symbolic stops working (or being written), threatening to let the entire knot come undone.⁵⁷ He states, “What I called this year sinthome is that which permits to repair the borromean chain . . . [I]f the symbolic is separated [from the knot], we have a means to repair it. It is by making what, for the first time, I defined as sinthome [*Ce que j’ai appelé cette année le sinthome, est ce qui permet de réparer la chaîne borroméenne . . . [S]i le symbolique se libère . . . nous avons un moyen de réparer ça. C’est bien de faire ce que, pour la première fois, j’ai défini comme le sinthome*]” (*Sf XXIII*, 93-94).

Hence, what still matters the most in this novel concept of sinthome seems to be the fact that the symbolic law, which was considered necessary by Lacan before *Seminar XX*, has turned out to be merely contingent. The symbolic law sometimes works, and sometimes does not. It sometimes holds together the other rings in the borromean knot; but other times it does not. Why does it work in this arbitrary way? Why does it suddenly stop working? Can it be fixed or “treated” in such a way that it can begin to work again, and, if so, how? These are the questions that Dr. Lacan seems to have in mind when he develops the concept of sinthome. The inference goes that, if it is true that the symbolic law at least does work sometimes, there must be some unknown factor or hidden detail that secretly helps it to work; one, therefore, must further investigate what this veiled ingredient required for a proper working of the symbolic might be.

⁵⁷ For Lacan, the borromean knot is a knot of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary (RSI), whose essential feature consists in the fact that, if one of the three rings is separated from the knot, then the remaining two also become unlinked (see Fig. 9).

Bringing a crucial correction to his old idea of the borromean knot, Lacan points out that it was a mistake to suppose there were only three rings (RSI) required for a successful binding of a borromean knot.

It is right here where resides the source of the error of thinking that this knot is a norm for the relation of three functions that exist to one another in their exercise only to the being who, by making knot, believes he is a man. What defines perversion is not the fact that the symbolic, the imaginary and the real are broken, because they are already distinct; hence it is necessary to suppose *a fourth, which is in this case the sinthome*.

C'est bien là que gît le ressort de l'erreur de penser que ce noeud soit une norme pour le rapport de trois fonctions qui n'existent l'une à l'autre dans leur exercice que chez l'être qui, de faire noeud, croit être homme. Ce n'est pas que soient rompus le symbolique, l'imaginaire et le réel qui définit la perversion, c'est qu'ils sont déjà distincts, de sorte qu'il en faut supposer un quatrième, qui est en l'occasion le sinthome. (Sf XXIII, 19; emphasis added).

Lacan argues that, if we have only and strictly three rings available to produce a borromean knot, we would not be able to topologically differentiate one ring from the others; instead, we would confuse all of them. He draws attention to the fact that, whenever he tries to illustrate the borromean knot to the audience, he has to indicate which ring represents which register (among RSI), not by referring to a topological difference discernible in the structure of the knot itself but to a color difference that does not really have anything to do with the knot (typically, the R is in blue, the S is in red, and the I is in green). This implies that the topological difference of the three rings is not inherent to the structure of the usual three-ring borromean knot; therefore, it must be introduced *from without*. Lacan argues:

The notable fact is that the orientation of rings is effective to render reparable the distinction of knots only on the condition that the difference of these rings is marked by color. What is thus marked by color is not the difference of one from another, but

their absolute difference, if I may say, in the sense that it is the difference common to the three. It is only if something is introduced to mark the difference among [all] three, and not the difference between any two of them, that consequently appears the distinction of the two structures of the borromean knot.

Le fait notable, c'est que l'orientation des ronds n'est efficace à rendre repérable la distinction des noeuds qu'à la condition que la différence de ces ronds soit marquée par la couleur. Ce qui est ainsi marqué par la couleur n'est pas la différence de l'un à l'autre, mais leur différence, si je puis dire, absolue, en ce qu'elle est la différence commune aux trois. C'est seulement si quelque chose est introduit pour marquer la différence entre les trois, et non pas leur différence deux à deux, qu'apparaît en conséquence la distinction de deux structures de noeud borroméen. (Sf XXIII, 52-53)

Then, the question becomes: what happens if such a topological difference is not introduced from without? The borromean knot made of three rings is reduced into one single ring, in which the RSI cannot really be distinguished from one another. For this reason, Lacan argues that what he has hitherto believed to be a borromean knot is in fact not a three-ring knot, but only a “chain.” The borromean knot can now be considered to be “the triple knot [*le noeud à trois*]” made of only *one ring*.

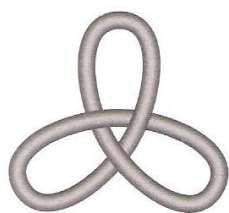


Fig. 10. *Le Noeud à trois (forme circulaire)* (Sf XXIII, 45)

Such a triple knot still seems to be able to describe the structure of RSI very well (see Fig. 10). But its difference from the usual borromean knot lies in the fact that, when there occurs an error in the way it is tied, this knot no longer turns into three separate rings of RSI, but, instead, into a single ring.

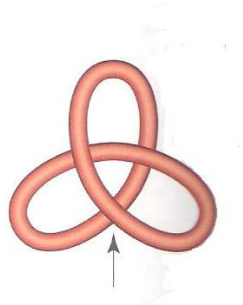


Fig. 11. *Noeud à trois erroné* (Sf XXIII, 92)

According to Lacan, this is in fact what is characteristic to the situation of psychosis (especially, paranoid), in which the subject is unable to tell the imaginary from the real, the symbolic from the imaginary, etc (Sf XXIII, 53). In fact, the borromean knot generated through a “normal” symbolic identification, in and of itself, carries such an inherent possibility of its turning into a paranoiac structure. One simple error in tying the knot is all it takes to trigger such a psychotic reaction (see Fig. 11). In order to explain what marks the difference between a successfully tied triple knot and a falsely tied (or untied) ring, Lacan introduces the function of an additional ring, namely the fourth ring added to the RSI, which is called “sinthome.” It is only with this fourth ring that one can somehow fix (in both senses of the term) the effect of the symbolic identification. Not only does the symbolic identification itself require such a fourth ring to work more or less successfully (as we shall see soon); but, in cases that the symbolic law fails, the knot can still be repaired with an introduction of a substitutive ring (this is what Lacan calls a “*suppléance*”). In any case, Lacan’s goal is clear; it is to help preventing the subject from lapsing into a pathological state of psychosis (see Fig. 11 and Fig. 12).

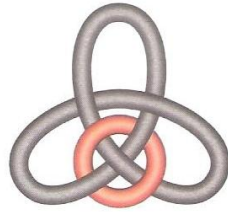


Fig. 12. *Boucle réparant le faux noeud de trèfle* (Sf XXIII, 88)

Rich consequences follow from the idea that the borromean knot does not just have three rings but also a hidden fourth ring. As we know, the most essential condition required for an advent of a “normal” subject consists in an overcoming of the Oedipus complex. By carrying out the identification with the symbolic father, the subject can distance itself from the game of competition it previously engages in with its father over the imaginary phallus. The efficacy of the symbolic identification, of course, is supposed to be guaranteed through a formation of the metaphor called “Name-of-the-Father.” However, Lacan now reveals that the formation of the paternal metaphor itself has a structure of *perversion*, because the subject’s “turning toward the father [*version vers le père*]” also implies a *père-version* of the whole borromean knot. Lacan says, “I would say that it is necessary to suppose what makes the borromean link, to be quadruple—that perversion only means *turning toward the father*—that in sum the father is a symptom, or, if you wish, a *sinthome* [*Je dis qu’il faut supposer tétradique ce qui fait le lien borroméen—que perversion ne veut dire que version vers le père—qu’en somme, le père est un symptôme, ou un sinthome, comme vous voudrez*]” (Sf XXIII, 19).

Why is “turning toward the father” considered a perversion? According to Lacan, it is because the Name-of-the-Father is also the Father of the Name: “It is insofar as the Name-of-the-Father is also the Father of the Name that everything is sustained, which does not make the symptom less necessary. [*C’est en tant que le Nom-du-Père est aussi le Père du Nom que tout se soutient, ce qui ne rend pas moins nécessaire le symptôme*]” (*Sf XXIII*, 23). Put otherwise, in order for the symbolic father *qua* a “Name” to be established as such, there must be an intervention from the side of the *real* father, whose vital function lies in forcing the subject to break away from the imaginary order of the mOther. It is through the real father *qua* a sinthome that the subject can find a way to avoid becoming a psychotic. But, *at the same time*, it is due to this very requirement of the real father that the subject is perverted toward a certain version of the father (*une version du père*). The question becomes, then: is there any way to escape from psychosis without becoming a perverse subject? In other words, is there any other kind of sinthome which does not necessarily imply a père-version of the subject?

The reason why Lacan is so interested in the case of Joyce is thus naturally explained; it is because Joyce is one of the rare individuals who managed to avoid becoming a psychotic while he apparently lacked a real father who could play the role of a sinthome for him. As Lacan points out, Joyce’s father was a contemptible alcoholic who hardly had anything valuable to offer his son.⁵⁸ This is why Joyce had no other choice but to become his own father (“*il [Joyce] est chargé de père*”; *Sf XXIII*, 22). Lacan

⁵⁸ In fact, Lacan’s own father was not so different; he was too weak a character, having had to grow up under the rule of a formidable father (that is, Lacan’s grandfather). This is why Lacan wants to identify himself with Joyce.

argues that Joyce's art works were just what made possible such a becoming his own father: "His desire to be an artist who would occupy everybody . . . isn't this exactly the compensation of the fact that, let us say, his father was never a father for him. Not only did he have nothing to teach, but he was negligent about almost everything. [*Son désir d'être un artiste qui occuperait tout le monde . . . n'est-ce pas exactement le compensatoire de ce fait que, disons, son père n'a jamais été pour lui un père? Que non seulement il ne lui a rien appris, mais qu'il a négligé à peu près toutes choses . . . ?*]" (*Sf XXIII*, 88).

To speak in more abstract terms, the scenario of the subject's entering the symbolic order via the formation of the paternal metaphor still depends for its success upon the presence of a certain real father. Such a real father is what according to Lacan forms "a symptom or a sinthome" in usual cases (*Sf XXIII*, 19). Whether or not the symbolic order can effectively usher the subject into a "normal" mode of subjectivity is *contingent upon* the presence or availability of a real father *qua* a sinthome (this is another reason why it can be said that the symbolic law is contingent). If the RSI can be differentiated for the subject only through the introduction of an additional ring called sinthome, correlatively we can say that the lack of a sinthome *may* result in a psychosis, in which the triple borromean knot is undone and thus returns to an undifferentiated original single ring. I said "may" because this is also the place where an error in the borromean knot may be approached and repaired; psychoanalysis, no longer understood as a science but as an art (a craftsmanship or a "know-how"), can try to clinically intervene in such a singular situation and fix the error. According to Lacan, the fact that Joyce could maintain his

sanity, even though he had every reason to go mad, eloquently shows that the role of his art (or art works) was for him just that of a *sinthome*.

Furthermore, Joyce's *sinthome* was not an ordinary *sinthome* like the real father, but a *sinthome* with which the subject could also stay away from the path to a *père*-version. Joyce could do away with the paternal metaphor, because he successfully engaged in a remarkable artistic practice in which he found a way to effectively inundate or "stuff" the language (English) with a plethora of signifiers (some of which did not even have an English origin); his highly sophisticated and abundant word plays and puns put on show an explosion of what the later Lacan called *lalangue* (namely, the musical dimension of language most commonly encountered in children's speech, in which dazzling and unexpected links between a number of unrelated or distant signifiers are produced through affinities in phonemic structures). By never stopping re-entering the open and simultaneously closed door of *lalangue*, Joyce could undermine the Shakespearean paternal authority operating in the language forced upon him; he did not lose the language in this way, but on the contrary was able to give it a new life and a new origin which could no longer be considered simply "English."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Joyce's brilliance in this respect is revealed, for instance, when he turns Shakespeare's phrase, "Fear not, till Birnam wood. Do come to Dunsinane" (*Macbeth* V.v.), into his own "Yet's the time for being now, now, now. For a burning would is come to dance inane" (*Finnegans Wake* 250.16). See Luke Thurston's interesting discussion of such a Joycean intervention in his *James Joyce and the Problem of Psychoanalysis*, especially chapter 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). However, I think Lacan's new strategy of *sinthome*, though it certainly shows a potential to become an alternative to his old tenet of symbolic identification, nonetheless remains *too individualistic and elitist*. Even if we accept *sinthome* as a new way to do "psychoanalysis," the fact remains that it would only have a limited applicability and thus work exclusively for exceptional individuals who can, and indeed dare to, live outside or at the very border of the symbolic. As is manifestly shown by the tragic case of Joyce's own daughter, Lucia, who went mad unlike her brilliant father, the strategy based on *sinthome* is not yet to be taken as a plausible solution for most analysts.

We know, however, that, when Lacan abandoned his belief in the necessity of the symbolic law, it was due to his new thesis that there was no such thing as a sexual relationship. Hence it is only natural for us to wonder in what way this thesis can be related to Lacan's discussion of *sinthome*. It is here that he reminds us of the fact that we already discussed above, namely that he employed the verb "*avoir*" instead of "*être*" in his formulation, "*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*" (*Sf XXIII*, 124). Just because there is (*avoir*) no such thing as a sexual relationship, it does not mean that there is (*être*) no such thing as a sexual relationship. Lacan focuses on the fact that the symbolic cannot tell the directions such as the right and the left. The right and the left are imaginary in nature, and therefore they are considered *equivalent* from the structural point of view of the symbolic. The sexual relationship between the male and the female is basically the same. There is no relationship between the male and the female, insofar as they are considered equivalent. Lacan illustrates his point by referring to the following two pictures.



Fig. 13. *Équivalence par inversion du rouge et du vert* (*Sf XXIII*, 99)

From a structural point of view, these two pictures are equivalent; in other words, they can easily be inverted to each other. The red and the green here respectively represent the male and the female, and it is to this extent that there can be found no difference but only equivalence between the two sexes. And if there is no difference, then

there is no relationship, either, because a relationship is supposed to be formed only between two distinct things. But Lacan argues that such a structure of equivalence can be modified or “repaired” to produce a difference.

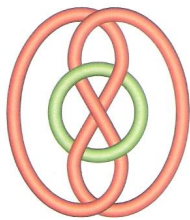


Fig. 14. *Noeud dit “en huit”* (Sf XXIII, 99)

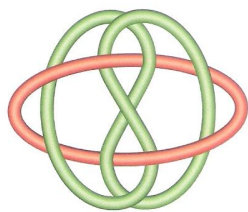


Fig. 15. *Non-équivalence par inversion du rouge et du vert* (Sf XXIII, 100)

It is based on such a topological difference between the two figures that Lacan claims: “At the level of *sinthome*, there is therefore no equivalence of the relation of the green and the red to satisfy us with this simple designation. As long as there is a *sinthome*, there is no sexual equivalence, that is to say, *there is a relation*. [*Au niveau du sinthome, il n’y a donc pas équivalence du rapport du vert et du rouge, pour nous contenter de cette désignation simple. Dans la mesure où il y a sinthome, il n’y a pas équivalence sexuelle, c’est-à-dire il y a rapport*]” (Sf XXIII, 101; emphasis added). In other words, there is a sexual relation, insofar as there is a *sinthome*. One of the two rings can play the role of a

sinthome for the other. Depending on how one ring is tied to the other, that is, how it supplements the other ring, there can be produced a difference in the orientation of the entire knot. Does this mean that *woman* can become a sinthome for man? Not really, because a sinthome by definition is something highly singular or individual; it cannot be defined in a universal way. Hence, it is not woman but only *a* woman (*une femme*) who can become a sinthome for man. This is also why Lacan modifies Freud's original question, "*Was will das Weib?*", into a new one, "*Was will ein Weib?*" (*Sf XXIII*, 67). Lacan criticizes Freud for reducing the sexual difference to something natural and general when it can appear only at the level of a highly individual artifice called sinthome.

I have no intention here to proceed further with this discussion of sexual difference. Instead, I would like to briefly return, by way of a conclusion to this chapter, to Althusser's criticism of Lacan's idea of the letter. As I said earlier, his criticism is not identical but only similar to Lacan's own self-criticism. The issue in which Althusser is interested is not really Lacan's phallogocentrism but his teleology that seems to arise out of his way of thinking about the relationships among various social instances (or, what amounts to the same, among psychoanalysis and other "fields"). Althusser, after introducing the aforementioned episode involving himself, Lacan, and a young Hindu doctor, continues to recollect what happened in the past:

Lacan thought about [the question of the letter] for ten whole minutes and then simply said: 'Althusser isn't a practising analyst.' He was right, of course. Within the framework of transference which forms part of analysis the affective relationship is so structured that no gap exists. As a consequence, any unconscious message which is truly addressed to the unconscious of the other person necessarily gets through. Yet I was not wholly satisfied with my explanation. Lacan was right, but so was I. I also knew full well that it was unfair to accuse him of idealism, because of

his materiality of the conception of the signifier. Then I saw a way out of the dilemma. *Lacan spoke as a practising analyst and I as a practising philosopher. They were two entirely different fields* which I could in no way reduce to one another, if I was to remain true to my critique of classical dialectical materialism: neither the philosophical to the analytic domain or to scientific practice, or vice versa. *We were therefore both right, but neither of us had perceived clearly the basis of our difference.*⁶⁰

Althusser here indicates that, although he is quite sure there is a difference between him and Lacan, the basis of their difference was not yet clearly perceived by either of them. It is from his essay, “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses,” which was posthumously published, but actually written in 1966, that Althusser seriously began to engage himself in an inquiry into this difference. In the next chapter, I would like to attempt to reconstruct his criticism of Lacan, and try to excavate another issue buried underneath the exposed surface of their debate. At issue is, again, the question of structuralism. But, in this debate, it is Lacan who tries to defend structuralism against Althusser’s critique of it.

⁶⁰ Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, pp. 187-88 (emphasis added).

CHAPTER THREE

THE ALTHUSSERIAN REAL AND THE QUESTION OF *TOPIQUE*

Althusser's Two Lectures

During the academic year 1963-64, Althusser organized a seminar on psychoanalysis with his students at the *École normale supérieure*, and gave two lectures, which were going to be posthumously published under the title, *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines: Deux conférences*. It was during this seminar (more precisely, January 1964) that Lacan, upon Althusser's invitation, came to the ENS and began his own series of seminars, the first of which was entitled *Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Althusser never showed up in person at Lacan's seminars, but carefully went over the notes that he acquired from some of his students who attended them. As we shall see soon, there are palpable traces of such studies in his conceptualization of ideological interpellation in 1971. But the two lectures Althusser gave in his own seminar are particularly interesting because they give us some ideas regarding the question: which aspect of Lacan's theory attracted him most, and which aspect rather appeared to have certain shortcomings?

According to Althusser, Freud, over the course of his theoretical career, became increasingly preoccupied with a *double* task: first, to separate radically psychoanalysis from the discipline apparently closest to it, namely, psychology, and, second, to make

psychoanalysis approach other existing disciplines that were apparently quite distant from it, namely, sociology, anthropology or ethnology (*PSH*, 77). This is because he was driven by the theoretical need to find a proper place of psychoanalysis, a place that could be claimed as its own, within the field of sciences. Once psychoanalysis produced its “epistemological break” and thus clearly brought forth the unconscious as its specific object, it soon found itself in a difficult situation in which its scientific discoveries were “contested and revoked” by the existing field of sciences. All the places having already been taken by other disciplines, psychoanalysis faced the danger of becoming reabsorbed into the existing field from which it once made its irruption. As a result, even after his modification of the definition of psyche, Freud was still forced to speak the obsolete language of psychology (its old notions or paradigms).¹ In order to surmount such a blockage, he could not simply stop at looking for a place of psychoanalysis in the established field of sciences, but go so far as to try to *make* one by transforming that field itself. This is why psychoanalysis had to fight most aggressively what seemed to be its nearest sibling, psychology, and find ways to relate its own object to objects of other sciences precisely by mapping out its borders with them.

Althusser argues that Lacan’s essential contribution in this regard can be found in his radical critique of *the psychological subject of needs*, the subject that psychology presumes when it tries to explain the process of the becoming-human of the infant qua a

¹ Some of the examples are the notion of “instinct” (which tends to confuse the border between the psychic and the biological), the “reality principle” (which basically understands the psyche as a result of a series of adaptations that the biological being makes in order to conform to given social norms), and the paradigm of developmental stages (which tries to analyze psychic phenomena essentially along the line of chronological development).

small biological being. What commands the entire problematic of psychology, according to Althusser, is the Condillacian idea of language, which was especially mobilized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to approach the phenomenon of the so-called “savage children” such as wolf children, cow children, or hog children: in brief, children collected from the forest who had previously lived with animals without any contact with the human world. Doctors and psychologists tried to teach them language by adopting a Condillacian pedagogy, whose underlying idea was that it would be possible to produce linguistic connections between the biological needs, already present in those wild children (thirst, hunger, etc.), and words or signs of language corresponding to those needs. In other words, they understood language essentially as a means to *express* the needs that subjects feel internally and want to communicate with one another.² Althusser

² In part II of his work, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, Condillac begins his discussion of “the origin of language” by making up a hypothetical story of two primitive children inventing language to express and communicate their needs to each other. The story goes: “§1 So long as the children I am speaking of lived apart, the exercise of the operations of their soul was limited to that of perception and consciousness, which do not cease so long as we are awake; to that of attention, which occurred whenever some perceptions affected them in a particular manner; to that of reminiscence, when the circumstances which engaged them stayed before their minds before the connections they had formed were destroyed; and to a very limited exercise of the imagination. The perception of a need, for instance, was connected with the object which had served to relieve it. But having been formed by chance and lacking the steady support of reflection, these connections did not last long. One day the sensation of hunger made these children call to mind a tree loaded with fruit which they had seen the day before. The next day this tree was forgotten, and the same sensation called to mind some other object. Thus the exercise of the imagination was not within their power. It was merely the effect of the circumstances in which they found themselves. §2 When they lived together they had occasion for greater exercise of these first operations, because their mutual discourse made them connect the cries of each passion to the perceptions of which they were the natural signs. They usually accompanied the cries with some movement, gesture, or action that made the expression more striking. For example, he who suffered by not having an object his needs demanded would not merely cry out; he made as if an effort to obtain it, moved his head, his arms, and all parts of his body. Moved by this display, the other fixed the eyes on the same object, and feeling his soul suffused with sentiments he was not yet able to account for to himself, he suffered by seeing the other suffer so miserably. From this moment he feels that he is eager to ease the other’s pain, and he acts on this impression to the extent that it is within his ability. Thus by instinct alone these people asked for help and gave it. I say ‘by instinct alone,’ for reflection could not as yet have any share in it. One of them did not say, ‘I must bestir myself in that particular way to make the other understand what I need and to induce him to help me’; nor the other, ‘I see by his motions that he wants to have something and I intend to give it to him.’ But both

argues:

. . . this becoming-human of a biological subject is interpreted all according to the ideology of the psychological subject defined by its needs; and language intervenes simply as a theory of sign in relation with thing, needs being themselves in relation with the thing, namely, the thing before it is obtained by language as a means of communication with another [person] who will offer the thing to the infant. Need determines itself, need expresses itself in a sign that goes to another [person] who offers the thing, and the thing is in direct relation with the need. The circuit is thus closed, but it makes emerge the presence of two subjects—the one who speaks (the subject who enunciates) and the one who comprehends language—and it makes emerge a particular status of language, in which there exists a univocal relation between sign and the thing signified, between the signifier and the thing signified. You find there the ideological background which puts an imaginary machine into [play] (*PSH*, 88-89)

Althusser claims that Lacan criticized such a psychological view of language or language acquisition by utilizing the rupture that modern linguistics, especially the Saussurean one, made. In the Condillacian conception of language, it is assumed that we chronologically proceed from the biological to the cultural; we are supposed to have biological needs first, and then express them with words that *re-present* them. Whether we made up the words on our own or whether we learned them from others does not matter much, insofar as they all originated from some pre-existing human needs. Needs

acted as a result of the need that was most urgent for them. §3 The frequent repetition of the same circumstances could not fail, however, to make it habitual for them to connect the cries of the passions and the different motions of the body to the perceptions which they expressed in a manner so striking to the senses. The more familiar they became with the signs, the more readily they were able to call them to mind at will. Their memory began to have some exercise; they gained command of their imagination, and little by little they succeeded in doing by reflection what they had formerly done only by instinct. In the beginning both made it a habit to recognize, by those signs, the sentiments which the other felt at the moment; later they used those signs to communicate the sentiments they had experienced. For example, he who came upon a place where he had become frightened, imitated the cries and motions that were the signs of fear to warn the other not to expose himself to the same danger, etc. etc.” (Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge, Being a Supplement to Mr. Locke’s Essay on the Human Understanding*, trans. Hans Aarsleff [London: Cambridge University Press, 2001], pp. 114-15). Also see G.A. Wells, *The Origin of Language: Aspects of the Discussion from Condillac to Wundt* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987), p. 8 ff.

in this sense appear to be the ultimate origin of language. Psychology attempts to establish the continuity between the biological subject and the cultural subject by referring to this temporal and linear development of language that proceeds from needs (or things that are in need) to words more or less corresponding to them.³

What Ferdinand de Saussure discovered, however, is that, if we did not have language as a network of differences of signifiers, we would not be able to approach things linguistically as distinct concepts in the first place; instead, we would have something like a continuum of things (a sort of “thing in itself” in a quasi-Kantian sense), in which all meanings are highly destabilized and confused, for no signified can ever be produced without the signifier, that is to say, without the difference it has with other signifiers. It is only through the workings of the whole matrix of signifiers that we can linguistically approach things themselves. Our idea of the direction of linguistic causality is thus reversed. It is language that acts upon things—not the other way around.⁴

³ Though Althusser’s criticism here focuses on the Condillacian psychology, it can be said that more recent psychological schools such as the Piagetian psychology or the behavioral psychology do not go out of the range of his criticism insofar as they all try to construct certain versions of genesis that trace the origin of the human psyche to the biological. The behavioral psychology explicitly brings its theoretical model from ethology, a study of patterns of animal behavior; Piaget, despite his affinity with structuralism, also develops what he calls “a genetic epistemology,” which fundamentally relates cognitive structures or stages to variations of biological regulations.

⁴ In his *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris [Chicago: Open Court, 1986]), Saussure argues: “In all these cases what we find, instead of *ideas* given in advance, are *values* emanating from a linguistic system. If we say that these values correspond to certain concepts, it must be understood that the concepts in question are purely differential. That is to say they are concepts defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterises each most exactly is being whatever the others are not” (p. 115) A few pages later, he continues: “Everything we have said so far comes down to this. In the language itself, there are only differences. Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, and no positive terms. Whether we take the signification or the signal, the language includes neither ideas nor sounds existing prior to the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences arising out of that system. In a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it. The proof of this lies in the

Likewise, when the infant is initially “inserted” in the cultural, Althusser argues, it is the cultural that acts upon the biological:

And what is of capital importance—this is what Lacan insists and this is his great discovery—is that this becoming-human, which will be figured for us thus by this vector, “passage from the biological to the cultural,” is in truth the effect of the action of the cultural upon the biological . . . Instead of having to deal with this vector “biology → culture,” . . . we have to deal with an inversion of the determination. It is by the action of culture on the small biological human being that its insertion in culture is produced. (*PSH*, 91)

A profound implication of this discovery, of course, is that *there is no such thing as originary subject*, neither in the form of psychological inclinations nor in the archaic form of pure biological drives. The subject of needs that psychology presumes at the beginning of the process of the becoming-human of the infant is rather an effect of the cultural that acts upon the biological. This does not mean that there is no such thing as a biological dimension we may ascribe to human beings; rather, it means that the biological as such *never exists in the form of the subject*. The initial subject that psychology assumes to be biological is, in fact, a *cultural* subject, a subject already constructed by the cultural and teleologically projected back into the biological, *as* the biological. Althusser argues: “what goes before the becoming-human of the small human being is not psychology, not the psychological subject [of needs], but what [Lacan] calls “the order of the symbolic” or what I would call, if you wish, the law of culture” (*PSH*, 91-92). It is, therefore, never the psychological subject defined by its needs that precedes and engenders the cultural subject in a progressive manner; on the contrary, it is the cultural (the symbolic order that

fact that the value of a sign may change without affecting either meaning or sound, simply because some neighbouring sign has undergone a change” (p. 118).

always already arrives in advance, as we discussed in chapter 1) that acts upon the biological and thus produces the effect of subject or, simply, the *subject-effect*. Lacan, by reversing the chronological vector of causality (from “biology → culture” to “culture → biology”), deprives the subject of any constituting or originating function, and unequivocally relegates it to the position that is fundamentally characterized by its passivity in relation to the cultural or the symbolic order.⁵

If this Lacanian critique of psychology and the psychological subject was what fascinated Althusser most, what appeared rather weak was Lacan’s belief that psychoanalysis alone could successfully carry out the task of transforming the existing field of sciences without receiving any aids from other sciences or disciplines. Before he quickly withdraws from discussing this issue, Althusser drops this short yet significant note: “Does psychoanalysis alone suffice to modify the *topology* of this field, that is to say, to change its nature and its internal divisions? This is an open question. Lacan indeed thinks that psychoanalysis can restructure the field upon which it irrupted. This is perhaps beyond its capacities [*C’est peut-être au-delà ses possibilités*]” (*PSH*, 81, emphasis added). Hence, the question Althusser raises with regard to the solidity of Lacan’s theoretical break is that of the articulation of the different objects of “human sciences,” which in turn represent nothing other than different social instances or levels. It is, in short, the question of *topique*, a spatial metaphor topographically representing the at once

⁵ In this respect, Althusser as well as Lacan takes a position quite akin to that of a more recent theorist of gender study like Judith Butler, who believes that sexual identities are never naturally given but always given as *naturalized results of cultural constructions*. One of their major differences is that Althusser does not want to emphasize the performative dimension as much as Butler does. We will soon return to this issue in the context of their debate on ideological interpellation.

bounding and differential (and even conflicting) relationships formed among diverse instances or levels of a social whole (political, ideological, and economic levels, for sure, but also individual and collective, practical and theoretical, discursive and non-discursive levels, and so on).

My thesis for this chapter is as follows. What Althusser unreservedly agrees on is Lacan's critique of psychology (ego-psychology) and, in particular, his theoretical decision to reverse the vector of causality (from "biology → culture" to "culture → biology"), a decision whose unmistakable implication is that, in order to move the category of the subject from an active to a passive position, it is indispensable to criticize all the attempts to locate the cause or germ of the subject in the form of *what precedes the subject within the subject itself*. Althusser's fundamental divergence from Lacan, on the other hand, arises with respect to the latter's tendency to theorize the constitution of the subject solely in relation to the *single* instance called language or the signifier. Althusser rather wants to conceive the question of the formation of the subject *within the complexity of social relations themselves*, within the overdetermination of plural heterogeneous instances of a given specific social formation.

In the next section, I will discuss Althusser and Lacan's convergence, and argue that the debate on ideological interpellation between the Slovenian school (especially, Mladen Dolar) and Judith Butler in the 1990s took place largely because they both failed to grasp the full implication of this convergence; despite their differences, they all regressed from the Althusserian-Lacanian logic of retroaction to the psychological logic of inception. In the third section, I will shift gears and approach the issue of Althusser's divergence from

Lacan by focusing on the singularity that the Althusserian real has in contrast to the Lacanian real. I will discuss Althusser's theoretical attempt to establish a materialist theory of discourses in terms of such a singularity.

Inception or Interpellation?

The Slovenian School, Butler and Althusser

The critically acclaimed film *Inception* (2010), directed by Christopher Nolan, offers a scene in which the character named Arthur, while being chased by his enemy on a spiral staircase, suddenly runs full circle, shows up right behind the enemy and attacks him. Before the movie comes to this scene, the director had already dropped a hint that in dreams such an impossible thing might happen, and thus the audience may enjoy it without bewilderment. Watching this scene, however, I was struck by an odd question: after beating his enemy this way, how could Arthur himself escape from the staircase which seems to go around in a circle infinitely? In fact, this endless staircase is a parody of Maurits Cornelis Escher's famous painting, *Ascending and Descending* (1960), in which the stairway, though it appears to ascend or descend, merely has a circular structure, leading to nowhere. When the director shows, at the very last scene, the top that keeps on spinning, he seems to be asking the audience the same question. This top is what the hero named Cobb spins in order to confirm whether he is in someone else's dream or in his own reality; if it tumbles to the ground, he is in reality, but if it keeps on spinning endlessly, this means he is in another's dream. This spinning top has the same structure as the infinite staircase. Can one escape from such a structure? Should we say Cobb has escaped from it? Or is he merely circling around in the staircase of infinite

dreams just like the top that would not fall? The director does not draw a solid conclusion for his audience.

Though the term “inception” primarily means “beginning” or “commencement,” the director also uses it to imply a plantation of an idea in someone’s mind, apparently by referring to its secondary meaning: “the action of taking in, as an organism.”⁶ At first glance, “inception” understood in this sense seems to bear similarities with Althusser’s concept of “interpellation.” One may wonder whether, by theorizing a process of planting an idea in an individual’s mind as an ideological interpellation, Althusser himself did not enter an endless staircase, on which the enemy he was chasing instantly returned behind his back, and then he tried to defend himself by quickly making his own circular trip and showing up behind his enemy’s back, and so forth. But are we sure that the second Althusser is the same as the first one? Is Althusser trapped on the staircase at all? After Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* criticizes Althusser’s thesis on interpellation by bringing into relief the dimension “beyond interpellation,” namely the dimension of the real as a remainder that the symbolic process left “behind its back,” Judith Butler (partly) defends Althusser by showing up once again behind the back of Žižek and the Slovenian School, and rebutting them from there. Still, one gets the curious feeling that no one in this game of unending chase has ever escaped from the infinite staircase.

Terry Eagleton shows us the essence of the controversy. In his essay, “Ideology and

⁶ “Inception, *n.*” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989 (OED Online: Oxford University Press), 20 October 2010 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

Its Vicissitudes in Western Marxism,” he points out the logical weakness of Althusser’s thesis as follows: “how does the individual human being recognize and respond to the ‘hailing’ which makes it a subject if it is not a subject already? Are not response, recognition, understanding, subjective faculties, so that one would need to be a subject already in order to become one? To this extent, absurdly, the subject would have to predate its own existence.”⁷ Hence, at issue is precisely the infinite staircase that Althusser’s thesis on interpellation opened up. Though he insists that ideology interpellates an individual into a subject, it seems that the individual already has to be a subject of some sort in order to “recognize” the interpellation itself. The subject thus returns behind the individual’s back in no time, having already finished its circular trip on the infinite staircase. Eagleton continues: “Conscious of this conundrum, Althusser argues that we are indeed ‘always-already’ subjects, even in the womb: our coming, so to speak, has always been prepared for. But if this is true then it is hard to know what to make of his insistence on the ‘moment’ of interpellation, unless this is simply a convenient fiction.”⁸

This logical weakness is also what Mladen Dolar is ultimately after in his essay, “Beyond Interpellation,” which he wrote in order to clarify Žižek’s criticism of Althusser. He argues, “the subject, prior to recognition in the Other, is not simply the individual. There is an ‘intermediary’ stage in that passage from the (real) individual into the

⁷ Terry Eagleton, “Ideology and Its Vicissitudes in Western Marxism,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994), p. 215.

⁸ Ibid.

(imaginary) subject, the stage where the process of symbolization opens an empty space, a crack in the continuity of being, a void which is not yet filled by the imaginary subjectivity. This empty space can be illustrated with the mechanism of forced choice.”⁹ We will see later what Dolar means by “forced choice.” He argues that what Žižek tries to demonstrate by introducing the idea of “belief before belief” is the theoretical necessity of establishing such an intermediary stage preceding the interpellation itself.

Dolar points out that, when Althusser discusses the production of a belief through the materiality of practices by referring to the Pascalian aphorism—“Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe!”—Althusser is unwittingly dealing with two different kinds of materiality. On the one hand, there is the initial materiality of the senseless rituals that the individual faces before it understands the meaning of any of the rituals; on the other, there is the second materiality, which consists of the same rituals, and yet is sustained by the subject’s internal belief. The question is: What makes the individual submit to the senseless rituals if it does not yet understand their meaning at all? The individual is certainly not propelled by its internal belief, since it is supposed to obtain this belief only after it becomes an “imaginary subject.” However, in order to simply follow the senseless rituals themselves, does it not have to have a minimal belief, “the belief that there is something to believe in”?¹⁰

Therefore, if there is “the first empty gesture” by which the individual gives its “consent” to follow the hollow rituals, there is “the second empty gesture” of recognition

⁹ Mladen Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation,” *Qui parle*, vol. 6 no. 2 (1993), p. 88.

¹⁰ Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation,” p. 90.

by which it finally achieves the internal belief by repeatedly following these rituals. Dolar argues that Althusser fails to theorize the first gesture, though not the second one. It is as if he were saying to Althusser what Cobb is saying: “there is a dream within a dream. If you want to plant an idea in someone’s mind, you should not stop at the first dream, but go deeper into the second one, and try to plant it there.” Criticizing Althusser for being content to make a single trip around ideology, Dolar quickly makes another trip on the infinite staircase and tries to attack Althusser; he does so precisely in the name of “belief before belief” or “subject before subject.”

Althusser, however, already encountered such a question before he wrote “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and gave his full answer for it. It is found in his “Letters to D,” the two letters addressed to Dr. René Diatkine, who later became one of his analysts.¹¹ In the first letter, Althusser strongly urges Diatkine to take Lacan’s theory into consideration, while in the second one he replies to Diatkine’s critical questions concerning some of the points he made in the previous letter. The central theme traversing both letters is a *critique of genesis*. According to Althusser, though Diatkine takes an appropriate distance from vulgar attempts to confuse psychoanalysis with biology or ethology, he nevertheless makes a mistake when he tries to distinguish two phases in the child’s development, namely the early phase that exclusively concerns biology, and the later one that concerns psychoanalysis as well, because the “unconscious” finally emerges in the child’s psychic life. Althusser argues that this attempt to locate the border between the two phases rather reveals that Diatkine is not yet free from genesis.

¹¹ Althusser, “Letters to D” (WP, 35-77).

He claims that one of the strengths of Lacan's theory, in contrast, lies in his refusal of genesis, a refusal to draw a dividing line between the two territories. If one adopts a genetic way of thinking, one is forced not only to divide the "before" and the "after" of the birth of the unconscious, but also to show how the transition from the "before" to the "after" takes place, or which element of the "before" eventually gives rise to the transition to the "after." In short, the question of *why* this transition occurs cannot be avoided; one submits to a *teleological reasoning* that searches for the germ of the "after" within the horizon of the "before." This chronological explanation, in particular, has a fatal flaw of being unable to account for the "atemporality" of the unconscious that Freud underlines.

Diatkine replies that, just because there is the atemporality of the unconscious, this does not mean that the unconscious does not begin "within time"; he insists on drawing a line between the "before" and the "after" of the emergence of the unconscious. While admitting that his previous use of the term "genesis" may be considered tricky, he simultaneously points out that Althusser himself cannot completely avoid using such a genetic language, and that he did use one in the previous letter by stating that "something new begins to function in an autonomous manner." In response, Althusser makes a conceptual distinction between "birth" and "irruption," and argues that the essence of the genetic teleology consists in coercing one to think of irruption only in the form of birth. To study the genetic process of something or someone is to follow "the trace only of an individual that possesses an identity, that is, an identifiable being" (*WP*, 56). Such an identity is supposed to be maintained throughout the entire genetic process. The genetic

thought is obliged to go so far as to posit an identity of some sort between the “before” and the “after” of its birth. Althusser argues:

Every genetic thought is literally obsessed by the search for a “birth,” with all that is entailed by the ambiguity of that word, which presupposes, among other ideological temptations, the (most frequently implicit or misperceived) idea that what is to be observed in its very birth *already bears its name*, already possesses its identity, is thus to a certain extent already identifiable, already exists in some manner *before its own birth* in order to be born! (WP, 57; original emphasis)

In this way, genetic thought always works backward, *teleologically*, by departing from the end of the process of a given individual, and (re)constructing its *origin* which was not there in the actual past. When an identity irrupts, namely, when an event irrupts in which an individual is endowed with an identity, the genetic thought *retroactively* projects this identity into the past and fictively constructs the entire course of the individual’s linear development.

Althusser already criticized this error of genesis when he introduced the concept of “society effect” in *Reading Capital* to determine what Marx’s proper question was.¹² According to Althusser, Marx did not ask how the modern bourgeois society historically originated and developed into what it was; instead, he asked through what mechanism the modern bourgeois society could exist *as a society*. This singularity of Marx’s question is what eternally differentiated his study of capitalism from all other prescientific studies of it. Of course, this is not to say that Marx denied the capitalist society was historically produced. Yet, the mechanism through which such a historical result exists as a society cannot be explained through a logic of genesis, but only through a study of the specific

¹² Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979), pp. 64-69.

way in which various elements are *combined* in the capitalist society. These elements which are often found in isolation from one another in precapitalist societies are undoubtedly indispensable for capitalism; but they are in themselves not capitalist per se. It is only by entering the capitalist structural mechanism of combination that these elements begin to function according to the capitalist logic. In order to explain to Diatkine the difference between irruption and birth, Althusser emphasizes the *contingency* of the combination of those elements that makes the capitalist society irrupt. He argues that the idealism of genesis consists in the fact that, by projecting into the past the result of the contingent encounter, it claims that the capitalist society developed necessarily and dialectically from a “capitalist” germ of some sort found within precapitalist societies.

Such a “retrospective illusion” (WP, 57), however, does not exclusively belong to theoreticians of genesis; at a much more general level, it constitutes the fundamental fantasy of all ideologies that produce a *subject-effect*. We often observe a child asking its parents, “Mom, Dad, where was I before I was born?” Embarrassed by the question and unable to offer an honest answer, the parents usually make up a story, “Why, dear, you were in heaven before you were born. It is a beautiful place where all babies happily await their own births.” One may object that it does not necessarily mean the parents themselves believe in their own lies. But can one honestly say that this is merely an illusion of childhood? Do we all not live somehow believing in the idea that we were always ourselves (and will forever remain ourselves)? Althusser writes to Diatkine, “I am thinking in particular of the fantasy according to which each person has a hard time

imagining that he did not exist prior to his own birth, in other words, that he has not for all eternity been endowed with the right to be born, the right to his own existence, to his own birth” (WP, 58). Althusser understood this illusion of *eternity* of the subject as an essential effect of ideological interpellation.

A cop hails a pedestrian from behind: “Hey, you there!” The pedestrian turns around, and at the moment she turns around, she is constituted as a subject, according to Althusser. And it is precisely here that Eagleton, Dolar, and Žižek all raise the same question: “*Why* does she turn around?” What is the cause necessitating such a turning around, which we can properly locate in the *before* of the turning around? Unless the individual is already a subject, how can it recognize the hailing of the cop as addressed to itself? And in the case of an individual who kneels down and prays, how can it give its “consent” to follow the meaningless rituals, unless it already has a certain minimal belief? In order to explain this consent, do we not need to posit an intermediary stage of “belief before belief” and “subject before subject”?

Althusser’s position, however, is that such a circularity of the infinite staircase of “X before X” is not the cause of the interpellation but merely its *effect*. Once the interpellation irrupts as an event, the subject retroactively projects the imposed identity into the past that has never been present and thus (re)constructs its own *eternal prehistory* as a necessary dialectical drama of the subject. Hence, if a theorist of ideology seeks a reason for the birth of the subject in the “before” of the interpellation, he necessarily falls into the same effect of the interpellation and thus himself becomes an ideological subject. The question he asks is practically the same as that of the aforementioned child: “Where

was the subject before it was born?” Once he thus enters the endless staircase of ideology, he can never escape from it by merely spinning around there, because, as Althusser clearly puts it, “Ideology has no outside.”¹³ In the endless staircase of ideology, *an infinite series of circles of desire* (structured like mirror within mirror) emerges just as in a scene from *Inception* in which two mirrored doors are made to face each other so that the illusion of an infinite series of mirrors is created, or just as in the painting *Alle spalle del desiderio* [Behind the Back of Desire] (1966) by Leonardo Cremonini, whose works Althusser discusses in one of his rare pieces on art.¹⁴ In this infinite staircase, there occurs an endless chase among subject and “subject before subject” and again “subject before subject before subject,” and so on. Althusser’s reply, therefore, is: “regretfully, there is no ‘subject before subject’ that you are searching for behind the back of the interpellated individual. Behind it there is no subject but only a cop, that is, an *apparatus*; the individual is constituted as a subject by *encountering* that apparatus. The ‘subject before subject’ is not the cause of such an encounter, but its *retroactive effect*.”¹⁵

Thus, we can also easily answer Eagleton’s question: If we are always already a subject, why does Althusser insist on the *moment* of interpellation? His query is the same

¹³ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (*LP*, 175).

¹⁴ Althusser, “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract” (*LP*, 229-42).

¹⁵ This phenomenon does not just occur at the level of the individual. As Étienne Balibar says, nation or “nation-form” fabricates its “past that has never been present” through such a retroactive projection. Balibar begins his essay by citing from Jacques Derrida’s *Margins of Philosophy*: “. . . a ‘past’ that has never been present, and which never will be.” See Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” in Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 86-106; Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 21.

as that of Diatkin who does not distinguish irruption from birth. Althusser does not consider this moment to be a moment of birth but one of irruption. When he says that we are always already subjects, he does not mean that we are literally born as subjects or that we grow as subjects in the womb. It would be a pure absurdity to say so. On the contrary, we *irrupt*; we irrupt *without knowing that we are subjects* into the middle of the ideological apparatuses that are always already at work. It is there where we become *conscious* of the effects of the apparatuses *qua* other bodies that surround and act upon our bodies. We cannot help but become conscious of these effects, precisely because, as Spinoza puts it, the effects of other surrounding bodies upon our bodies and our ideas of the very effects are *one and the same* (any attempt to introduce a gap between these two results in idealism).¹⁶ And yet, from the moment that we are conscious of the effects of the apparatuses (which is the moment of interpellation), we begin to think and act *as if* we had been “always already” the same subject that we are now, by constructing our infinite past around the very result of the identification.

This is how interpellation produces its infinite staircase. Individuals *misrecognize* the identities given to them as their own eternal origins by teleologically inverting the produced effects into the causes. Michel Pêcheux, one of Althusser’s students, later ingeniously calls this inversion the “Münchhausen effect” in his *Language, Semantics and Ideology*.¹⁷ In the well-known German tale of Baron Münchhausen, the baron boasts

¹⁶ See Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Part II, Propositions 12 and 13 in Samuel Shirley (ed. & trans.), *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), pp. 251-52.

¹⁷ Michell Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, trans. H. Nagpal (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), pp. 103-9.

of his adventures in which he avoided misfortunes by performing incredible deeds such as the great leap he made over a huge bog by repeatedly pulling up on his own hair whenever he started to fall. Pêcheux argues that Baron Münchhausen's impossible logic is precisely what sustains the illusion in which the subject freely brings itself into being, and thus appears to itself to be its own cause (*causa sui*): "X before X" or "X engendering X." One may here think of another famous painting by Escher, entitled *Drawing Hands* (1948), in which the two hands draw each other in a circular manner. In all these cases that generate the illusion of infinity, the subject establishes its identity as an eternal "self-evident truth" by covering up the traces of heteronomy, the traces of causal actions of the apparatuses.¹⁸

¹⁸ One may ask, though: what is the exact nature and function of the contingency involved in the "encounter" between individuals and ideological apparatuses? While thinking about this question, I came across with the example of Chinese fortune cookies, which became one of my favorites. Why are we so attracted to this silly cultural practice that, every time we dine at a Chinese restaurant, we wait with a bit of excitement to receive and crack open the cookies and read the messages in there? We know very well that the real purpose of fortune cookies has nothing to do with our fortunes; it is all about commercial profits of restaurants, bakery companies, etc. And yet there is something about fortune cookies that irresistibly tempts us to look at what they say about our fortunes. What can this something be if not the fact that it is *this* fortune cookie *and no other* that found a way to "myself"? It is nobody else but "me" who got this message conveyed in this cookie. Such pure contingency, it seems, is what contributes to the generation of a magical link between "me" and the abstract function of the consumer of Chinese food, the function determined, again, neither by me nor by my luck but by the system of commercial profits. We teleologically turn such contingent results into *causes* of our fates, special messages that the Fate or a certain God has sent to us. In his "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses," Althusser says: "In every social formation, the base requires the support-[*Träger*] function as a function to be assumed, as a place to be occupied in the technical and social division of labour. This requirement remains abstract: the base defines the *Träger*-functions (the economic base, and the political or ideological superstructure *as well*), but the question of *who* must assume and carry out this function, and how the assumption of it might come about, is a matter of *perfect indifference* to the structure (base or superstructure) that defines these functions: it 'doesn't want to know anything about it' (as in the army). / It is ideology which performs the function of designating the subject (in general) that is to occupy this function: to that end, it must *interpellate it* as subject" (HC, 51; original emphasis). A few pages later, Althusser argues in a similar vein, "The structure *requires Träger*: ideological discourse *recruits* them for it by interpellating individuals as subjects to assume the functions of *Träger*. The conscription carried out by the structure is blank, abstract, anonymous: the functions of *Träger*. Ideological discourse provides the *who*: it interpellates individuals in the general form of the interpellation of *subjects*. Thus it is personal, 'concrete'; it is not blank, but, as the ideology of 'mass' industry explicitly says, 'personalized'." (HC, 55-56; original emphasis).

Althusser and Pêcheux's argument, however, is not so different from Lacan's own. This is why Althusser strongly advises Diatkine to recognize Lacan's theoretical contribution by appreciating his refusal of genesis. It is hard to believe that Dolar is unaware of this logic of the retroactive constitution of the subject. In fact, we see him expound Lacan's concept of "forced choice" by referring to this logic. The forced choice is the concept Lacan devises in his *Seminar XI* in order to explicate the structure of the alienation occurring at the moment when the child enters the field of language. The robber approaches the victim and makes an ultimatum with a gun pointed at him: "Your money, or your life!" Although the robber apparently gives the victim a choice, this choice actually functions merely as a formal procedure through which the robber forces upon the victim the decision he already made on his own. Then, why does Lacan still call it a "choice"? Dolar insists that Lacan's use of this term should not mislead readers to think that the victim really has a choice at the outset.¹⁹ It only means that, although the victim never really made that choice (the robber did), he can *retroactively* recognize and accept it as his own choice. Likewise, the *formality* of choice initially given to the subject when it enters the field of language is required because it is what enables it to constitute itself, *post festum*, as an autonomous subject. In this way, the initial compulsion by the Other is concealed as if it had been the subject's choice all along.

Then, why can we not apply the same logic of retroaction to Althusser's interpellation? Is this not precisely what he suggests when he discusses the ambiguity of the term "subject" (the subjugated subject *and* the autonomous subject working "all by

¹⁹ Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation," p. 83.

himself”)? Althusser argues, “the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall accept (freely) his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’.”²⁰ Hence, the Althusserian individual, too, made only a “forced choice.” It is interpellated as a *free* subject—that is, it is initially allowed a *formality* of choice—in order that it shall *accept freely its subjection*. Whether it should turn around or not is already decided in advance, because, as Althusser says, if it runs, then the cop, the ideological state apparatus, will immediately turn into a repressive one and chase after it.²¹ Still, the formality of choice (strictly understood as a *structure* of the apparatus) is required because it is what differentiates the operation of ideological state apparatus from that of repressive one; Althusser both discriminates and combines these two types in the figure of the cop. Then, the Althusserian individual’s “consent” to follow the senseless rituals is only a *retroactive category* just like the Lacanian subject’s choice. The individual is first *coerced* to kneel down and pray and then begins to have a belief in those rituals by making retroactive “gestures and actions” of freely accepting the subjection. It can only become an “autonomous” subject by recognizing the imposed identity as its “inner essence” and, thus, by simultaneously covering up the traces of the compulsion by the Subject.

²⁰ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (*LP*, 182).

²¹ Althusser’s discussion of this point is also found in his “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses” where he says, “In ideology, all questions are thus settled *in advance*, in the nature of things, since ideological discourse interpellates-constitutes the subjects of its interpellation by providing them in advance with the answer, all the answers, to the feigned question that its interpellation contains.” (*HC*, 54-55).

From Dolar's standpoint, however, there seem to remain two more questions unanswered in Althusser's exposition. First, Lacan's concept of forced choice does not simply imply that the subject acquires an illusion of autonomy by retroactively endorsing its own subjection; it also implies that the subject experiences a fundamental loss through this process of alienation and thus becomes a being marked by a "void." In fact, what Lacan designates as the genuine subject is not really the person who survives the robbery but the void itself left to that person through the loss of money. But the void is not lacking in Althusser's scheme either: for Althusser, this void, which gives rise to the subject's desire, is what is already contained as a *vanishing point* within the structure of an infinite series of ideological mirrors. Of course, Dolar would want to argue that Lacan's concept of the void is theorized in an essentially different way, since it is what may lead the subject to a subversive act against the symbolic, triggering an explosion of ideology.²² But, as we already discussed it in the previous chapters, Lacan did not choose to go this way, insofar as he aimed at theoretically determining the *structural limit* of the dialectical movement of desire by employing concepts such as "castration" and "the name-of-the-father." The "separation" that the Lacanian subject is supposed to accomplish is only a separation *from the mother*, which it can only fulfill under the condition that it is absolutely dependent upon the *metaphor of the father* (and his *symbolic phallus*). In other words, the Lacanian subject's "passion for the real" is doomed to failure unless it finds a way to (re)incorporate itself into the symbolic order proper. Toward the conclusion of his "Position of the Unconscious," which was written in 1964

²² Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation," p. 92.

when his *Seminar XI* was in progress, and the celebrated concept of separation was introduced in opposition to that of alienation, Lacan argued:

On the side of the Other—the locus in which speech is verified as it encounters the exchange of signifiers, the ideals they prop up, the elementary structures of kinship, *the metaphor of the father as principle of separation [la métaphore du père comme principe de la séparation]*, and the ever reopened division in the subject owing to his initial alienation—on this side alone and by the pathways I have just enumerated, *order and norms must be instituted which tell the subject what a man or a woman must do.*” (EC, 720; translation modified and emphasis added)

The second problem that Dolar points out is that, while the Althusserian subject is the same as the ego, the Lacanian subject is not reducible to it but should be understood as a “void” or a “crack” that the symbolic, prior to the formation of such an ego, makes in the continuity of material being. Hence, the Lacanian symbolic itself should not be seen as something material, as Althusser presumes, but something fundamentally *immaterial*. It is only after the symbolic produces an empty void in the midst of being that a certain imaginary identity may try to fill it. Dolar argues that this empty subject is indeed what psychoanalysis considers the *true subject*, which must be distinguishable from the Althusserian imaginary subject. It is “the symbolic subject . . . not based on recognition, the empty space that Lacan marks \$.”²³ To this criticism, I would like to propose an Althusserian reply which is *triple*.

First, Dolar’s claim that the Lacanian symbolic is not material but immaterial has nothing to do with Lacan’s own position. According to Dolar, what is crucial to Lacan is the immaterial logic of the “symbolic automatism.” Yet in his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” Lacan defines repetition automatism as the movement of a pure

²³ Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation,” 90.

signifier (the signifier without the signified): “We shall see that [the subjects’] displacement is determined by the place that a pure signifier—the purloined letter—comes to occupy in their trio. This is what will confirm for us that it is *repetition automatism*” (EC, 10; original emphasis). A few pages later, Lacan adds, “You realize . . . that my aim is *not* to confuse letter [i.e. the pure signifier] with spirit . . . it is first of all *the materiality of the signifier that I have emphasized*, that materiality is singular in many ways, the first of which is not to allow of partition. Cut a letter into small pieces, and it remains the letter that it is” (EC, 16; emphasis added). Here, what Lacan calls the pure signifier, of course, is not *die Sache* (ordinary object) but *das Ding* (word as thing). Still, his argument cannot be mistaken: the pure signifier produces repetition automatism *insofar as it is material*.

Secondly, according to Dolar, the subject as a void that the process of symbolization produces is what Lacan marks as “\$,” the barred subject, whose void the imaginary identity may fill later on. But this too is far from Lacan’s own account, since the Lacanian “\$” is what emerges *through the split between the imaginary ego and the subject of the unconscious*. In other words, insofar as the bar drawn through the “S” marks the division between consciousness and the unconscious, between meaning and nonmeaning, etc., it is unintelligible that the “\$” is first formed and then an imaginary identity fills it later.

Lastly, Dolar maintains that, since the Lacanian subject is nothing but a simple void, it is not a subject characterized by its identity as the Althusserian imaginary subject is. He contends that the Lacanian subject cannot be thought of along the logic of identity; it is rather what makes this logic ultimately fail. It is true that, even if we cannot accept

Dolar's claim that the subject of the unconscious arrives prior to the imaginary ego, nevertheless there is in Lacan a category called "the subject of the unconscious," whose equivalent is not found in Althusser. The question is: Can it be considered one of the strengths of Lacan's theory? Rather, is it not the case that Dolar's whole argument here actually misses the rudimentary point that identity is essentially defined as something maintained *despite* all the mutations and discontinuities that an individual experiences in a positive way? Identity as a *void*, or, more precisely, personal identity as the identity of the empty transcendental reflective gesture of consciousness "accompanying" the subject's various mental activities (past and present), is actually the classical definition developed by the modern empiricist philosopher, John Locke, who invented the very notion of consciousness. By emptying all substantiality out of it, Locke defined consciousness as the source of personal identity which could persist despite all the changes that an individual undergoes.²⁴ Explaining the extraordinary capacity of individual identity to adopt changes, Althusser in his second letter to Diatkine says:

[T]he thought of a genesis tolerates quite well . . . the [idea] of mutations or even of discontinuities, on the *absolute condition* that one be able to designate those mutations and discontinuities *in* the development of a previously identified selfsame individual that is thus identifiable as *the constant support of those—or its—*

²⁴ This Lockean consciousness is remarkably different from the Cartesian cogito fundamentally characterized by its ability to define itself as a *substance* or a *thing* that thinks at the beginning of the process of reasoning. The cogito's self-reflectivity, for this reason, disappears as soon as other mental activities begin; its continuity, that is to say, its *identity*, is rather externally guaranteed by the good will of God. On the other hand, when Locke defines personal identity through the ability of consciousness to reach all the past and present mental activities by *re-membling* them, he is able to do so because he has completely divorced consciousness from substantiality. It is the void or empty set called consciousness that constitutes the subject's identity. See Locke, "Of Identity and Diversity," *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: Volume One*, trans. A. C. Fraser (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1959), pp. 439-70 (especially, 448 ff); Balibar, "Le traité lockien de l'identité," in Locke, *Identité et différence: L'invention de la conscience*, ed. & trans. Balibar (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1998), pp. 9-101.

mutations and discontinuities. (WP, 56; emphasis added)

In brief, identity is a substratum which remains constant while all kinds of mutations take place upon it. In this perspective, Dolar's claim that Lacan's "subject of the unconscious" has nothing to do with identity *because* it merely designates an empty void, appears groundless. The subject defined as a void, which diverse discontinuous experiences may enter or pass through, is what realizes—not betrays—the ideological genetic logic of identity in that it functions as a *center of logos* which gathers all the complicated heterogeneous events and transforms them into a historical narrative of an individual. This is why Althusser refuses Lacan's notion of "the subject of the unconscious." In one of his posthumous writings, titled "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses," Althusser admits that there opens a "void" or an "abyss" next to the ego, when the latter is formed as an ideological subject; but he declines to give it the name of "the subject of the unconscious" (HC, 77-78).²⁵

Asserting that Althusser missed the first empty gesture of the symbolic subject, though not the second (imaginary) one, Dolar argues that it is necessary to go until one reaches a more fundamental dimension "beyond interpellation" (or "before" it). It seems, however, that, with this idea, he regresses into the logic of *inception* even though he himself initially recognized the Lacanian logic of *retroaction*. Just like Cobb, the hero of *Inception*, Dolar seems to be lost on the infinite staircase of ideology, when he insists that

²⁵ In his own way, Robert Pfaller came to the same conclusion: "From an Althusserian position, . . . in ideology we do not only have to do with some phantasmatic or imaginary content (which fills the void of "true subjectivity"); ideology is as well the appearance of a void that seems to be something totally different from any ideological content" (Pfaller, "Negation and Its Reliabilities: An Empty Subject for Ideology?", in S. Žižek [ed.], *Cogito and the Unconscious* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1998], pp. 240-01).

one must go deeper into the mind and locate the “belief before belief.” In contrast, Althusser argues that one does not need the logic of inception but only that of interpellation to think of the constitution of the subject; one is not required to go deeper and have the belief or the subject (soon to be born) conceived in advance. Rather, Althusser argues:

If, then, one can follow the trace only of an identified individual, it is identifiable *from the inception*, otherwise the very project of “elaborating its genesis” disappears . . . This corresponds to what is implied in the connotative system of the concept of genesis: in every genesis the individual of the end (what is to be engendered) is contained *in germ* from the *inception* of its process of engendering. (HC, 56; original emphasis)

What Geoffrey Mehlman translates as “from the inception” in “Letters to D” is “*dès origine*” in the original French text. In a coincidental way, we are here reminded that the term “inception” primarily means “origin.” Inception or interpellation? Origin or interpellation? This is the question Althusser asked, and his answer was anti-inceptionist to the hilt; he processed his concept of interpellation from such an unyielding antiteleological position.

Some of the theoretical points that have been elaborated thus far, however, were already made by Judith Butler in a more or less similar fashion. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she defended Althusser against Dolar by arguing that both Althusser and Lacan thought of the process of subjection/subjectivation according to the logic of retroaction.²⁶ Though Žižek wrote a few pieces defending Dolar’s position, he does not seem to bring

²⁶ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 124.

any fresh points to the debate.²⁷ An issue rather arises from Butler's side, because, while refuting Dolar, she proposes her own critique of Althusser. Though in a way quite different from Dolar's, Butler, too, seems to enter the endless staircase of ideology by asking *why* the individual turns around.

Significantly, Althusser does not offer a clue as to why that individual turns around, accepting the voice as being addressed to him or her, and accepting the subordination and normalization effected by that voice. Why does this subject turn toward the voice of the law, and what is the effect of such a turn in inaugurating a social subject? Is this a guilty subject and, if so, how did it become guilty? Might the theory of interpellation require a theory of conscience?²⁸

Butler explicitly rejects the category of "subject before subject," but she simultaneously wants to keep the question of what element inherent to the individual makes it turn around toward the interpellating voice, toward its own subjection. Here she points out that the figure of turning around is closely related to the "tropological inauguration" of the subject. The term "tropology," which means "rhetoric," has a sense of turning around, as its Greek etymological root, "trope," shows. She claims that a "tropological presumption" is required for a study of the formation of the subject, precisely because it is impossible to carry out the study without paradoxically referring to the being which does not yet exist, namely, the subject.

A subtle but important difference is detected, then, between Althusser and Butler.

Althusser proposes to completely abandon the problematic of genesis and warns that, if

²⁷ See, for instance, Žižek, "Passionate (Dis)Attachments, or, Judith Butler as a Reader of Freud," *The Ticklish Subject* (New York: Verso, 1999), pp. 247-312; Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, eds. J. Butler et al. (New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 90-135. In fact, Žižek completes Dolar's regression to the logic of inception precisely by rejecting the logic of retroaction. See Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), pp. 343-44.

²⁸ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 5.

one accepts it even minimally, one cannot avoid committing the teleological error of positing the existence of an individual before its own birth. By contrast, Butler suggests that one may remain within the problematic of genesis insofar as one takes a *tropological* approach rather than an *ontological* one; while no such thing as subject before subject actually “exists,” one can still *rhetorically* indicate within the preinterpellated individual the moment of such a subject, and thus initiate the study of its formation. Butler argues: “The paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely, that we must refer to what does not exist. Through a figure that marks the suspension of our ontological commitments, we seek to account for how the subject comes to be.”²⁹

Butler introduces her notion of “passionate attachment” in order to explain the necessary turning around of the individual toward the interpellating voice. What forms her theoretical reference here, somewhat surprisingly, is Spinoza’s notion of *conatus*, namely the individual’s effort to persevere in its being. Butler explains that what forces an individual to turn around toward power is its passionate attachment to its life. Pronouncing, “I would rather exist in subordination than not exist,” the individual not only submits to the power but becomes a subject who passionately desires its own subordination. According to Butler, this passionate attachment, above all, appears as a “movement of conscience” placing the individual as an *a priori* culprit before the law; it produces the individual’s subjection to the law even before it is aware of its contents. She argues that the guilty conscience that the individual gains in this way forms a condition of possibility for a successful interpellation: “[Althusser’s] doctrine of interpellation appears

²⁹ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 4.

to presuppose a prior and unelaborated doctrine of conscience.”³⁰

Admittedly, it is hard to say that Althusser developed a significant theory of conscience during his lifetime. But, considering his way of thinking, it is equally hard to think that he would have supported Butler’s position. Even if she insists her theorization is done only from a tropological viewpoint, she still seems to think of the issue in a teleological (and psychological) way, only vetoing the “existence” of the subject prior to the interpellation. The question is: How can an individual possibly know that its turning around toward power will deliver it the life and safety it seeks, unless it has already experienced them in some way? How can it believe the words of the big Other promising such things, if it does not yet even understand its words? When the question of belief is thus raised, would Butler not become vulnerable to Dolar’s and Žižek’s critique?

In fact, what accounts for the formation of conscience in Spinoza, to whom Butler refers for the notion of passionate attachment, is still the logic of retroactive constitution. According to Étienne Balibar, in “A Note on ‘Consciousness/Conscience’ in the *Ethics*,” Spinoza was a figure who lived during the time in which the Latin term *conscientia* underwent a radical change.³¹ Though the term originally had the exclusive meaning of “conscience,” it began to imply both “conscience” and “consciousness” in the seventeenth century, when Locke gave the English neologism “consciousness” a new philosophical meaning. The singularity of Spinoza’s usage of the term *conscientia* lies in treating consciousness and conscience *as the same thing*. For him, consciousness

³⁰ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 109.

³¹ Balibar, “A Note on ‘Consciousness/Conscience’ in the *Ethics*,” *Studia Spinozana*, 8 (1992), pp. 37-53.

functions as the differential between appetites and desires; while other animals only have appetites, human beings have desires because they are also conscious of their appetites. However, all they are aware of is the presence of such appetites in themselves; they do not know in what way they were determined to have such appetites. Due to this ignorance, human beings are led to teleologically invert the causal chain in question, make themselves the final cause toward which other things ought to aim, and thus classify all the surrounding things into good things and bad things for themselves. It is insofar as the moral values spring from such a process of teleological inversion that consciousness is deemed to be the same as conscience. Hence, for Spinoza, conscience is formed through human beings' *retroactive projection* of what they already experienced as good and bad for themselves. Of course, this does not mean that each subject can arbitrarily decide what moral good is. Such a process requires subjects to establish the *identity* of the moral system by simultaneously positing at the origin of the world the existence of the selfsame God who functions as a mirror for them. From then on, all miseries happening to subjects are *misrecognized* as so many results of their violations of God's commands.³²

Would this account of conscience satisfy Butler? It seems that this is conversely where her major objection may arise. If we understand the retroactive constitution of the subject from such a thoroughgoing ontological viewpoint, how can we even begin to theorize the subject's possible resistance to its ideological subjection? Butler argues:

“[Althusser's] exposure lacks the power to defuse the force of ideology. [His] own

³² Spinoza's distinction between appetite and desire appears in *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 9, Scholium (*Spinoza: Complete Works*, p. 284). As for the production of guilty conscience through a teleological inversion, see Part I, Appendix (pp. 238-43).

writing . . . invariably enacts what it thematizes, and thus promises no enlightened escape from ideology through this articulation.”³³ Indeed, ever since her earlier text on Althusser, “Gender is Burning,” her foremost complaint has been directed toward his underestimation of the range of bad subjects’ disobedience.³⁴ What she wants to preserve by stressing the irreducibility of the dimension of tropology is the possibility of theorizing *the performative contingency involved in the subject’s enunciation* as the source of resistance that can never be exhausted by the ontological necessity of power. Evoking Jacques Derrida’s concept of “iterability” (namely, repeatability achieved through the other), Butler tries to designate the subject’s performative enunciation as the dangerous supplementary moment of alterity included in the reproductive process of power.³⁵

If this is a possible way to think of resistance, why would Althusser not choose to go this way? To investigate this question, it is enlightening to consult Pêcheux, who inherits and more fully develops Althusser’s position. In *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, Pêcheux describes the situation of linguistics in the 1970s as a discordant one in which three different tendencies were competing one another: a formalist tendency, a historicist

³³ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 110.

³⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 122.

³⁵ To this criticism, Franck Fischbach tried to rejoin by pointing out that Butler does not raise the reverse question of why ideological interpellation succeeds in the majority of cases despite its occasional failures resulting in productions of bad subjects. What is more important and enigmatic for him is rather its overwhelming success. However, this rebuttal unwittingly misses the fact that Butler already discussed this issue in her own way by proposing the notion of “passionate attachment,” which is designed to explain precisely the necessity of the *primary* success of interpellation (cf. Fischbach, ““Les sujets marchent tout seuls . . .”: Althusser et l’interpellation,” in Jean-Claude Bourdin (ed.), *Althusser: une lecture de Marx* [Paris: PUF, 2008], pp. 113-145). Her discussion of bad subjects rather concerns the question of how such dominance established through interpellation can still be resisted.

tendency, and “the tendency of linguistics of parole.” The first tendency declares *langue* as the proper object of linguistics, and claims that langue is not historical but structural and systematic (thus stressing the *necessity* of language); whereas the second and the third tendencies focus on historical changes in language or different effects of the subject’s enunciation upon language, and thus bring into relief the excessive dimension of the *nonsystemic determination* qua the remainder or surplus of language (thus stressing the *contingency* of language).³⁶

Pêcheux, however, argues that this conflict in the modern linguistics reproduces the confrontation of *the two representative tendencies of idealism* in the seventeenth century: rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism privileges “logic” (or “theory of knowledge”), which articulates the ontological truth of essences in the external world, while marginalizing the “art of speaking” or “rhetoric” as a secondary discipline merely aiming at conforming to the rules of logic. This position (to which Spinoza rather makes an exception precisely because his model of causality is not a mechanistic one) is dominated by “the idealist ambition to achieve a universe of ‘fixed and unequivocal’ statements embracing the whole of reality.”³⁷ On the other hand, in empiricism, the center of attention is occupied by the subject’s inner experiences, to the extent that the external world itself is denied as in George Berkeley; since the empiricist subject is considered the “source of discourse,” rhetoric replaces logic as the primary discipline (pragmatism inherits this tendency by defining truth through the benefits it brings to the subject).

³⁶ Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, p. 5 ff.

³⁷ Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, p. 44.

Butler's attempt to discover the source of resistance from a rhetorical standpoint by referring to the subject's performative as a contingent remainder unexhausted by the necessity of the interpellation, then, may appear to be caught up in the idealist dichotomy of langue/parole, necessity/contingency, and objectivity/subjectivity. In fact, the position of "constructivism" she took in her early work, *Gender Trouble*, gave rise to a suspicion that she might have a strong tendency toward voluntarism of treating everything as a subjective construction.³⁸ Although in her subsequent work, *Bodies That Matter*, she corrects such a tendency by introducing the notion of "materialization" in place of "construction",³⁹ nevertheless one may ask whether she is still not confined in the idealist dichotomy when she seeks the possibility of resistance in the subject's performative contingency overflowing the structure of power.

To find a way to think of resistance while thoroughly committing oneself to the anti-teleological logic of retroactive constitution of the subject, it is necessary to introduce the distinction between *language* and *discourse*. In fact, linguistics posits the dimension of parole next to that of langue in order to suture its own failure to theorize discourse at a distinct level irreducible to language. By establishing discourse as a scientific object (articulated with but distinguishable from language), Pêcheux proposes to stop handing over to historicism and subjectivism what the aforementioned second and third linguistic tendencies viewed as a dimension exceeding langue, and to study it at the level of the *materiality of discursive formations*. For this purpose, he simultaneously supports and

³⁸ Balibar, "Les universels," *La Crainte des masses* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), p. 431.

³⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 4 ff, p. 125.

criticizes Stalin's famous thesis that language is an infrastructure—not a superstructure. Although Stalin rightly avoids the ultra-leftist opportunism by insisting that language itself—that is, words and signifiers—is class neutral and therefore politically irrelevant, nonetheless he commits a rightist error by ignoring *the class struggle carried out at the level of discourse*, namely, the class struggle materializing through class specific ways to combine and articulate the class neutral words and signifiers *within discourses*.⁴⁰

Ideological interpellation is situated at the level of discourse. It is, moreover, not performed by a unified discourse belonging to a single class, but by *the complex whole of ideological formations which has a structure of dominance*.⁴¹ This is why interpellation does not (re)produce a readymade pure discourse of the dominant class but the discursive hierarchy itself in which ideologies of the dominated as well as the dominant are included in a contradictory way. It is to this extent that ideological interpellation always presupposes and takes place through class struggle (and other struggles). The dominant ideology would not be dominant unless it reflects the force relationship between the dominant and the dominated, and, hence, *the voices of the dominated themselves*, even if in a distorted way. The Butlerian subversive “citationality” (citing authority in a reversing or displacing manner) would not be possible unless these voices are already inscribed as *internal distances* within the interpellating voice itself. The effect of dominant ideology consists in concealing such antagonisms in society—though always in an imperfect manner—by retroactively inverting the dominance produced as a *result* of discursive and

⁴⁰ Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, p. 55 ff.

⁴¹ Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, p. 101.

nondiscursive struggles, into the *cause* of society.

Althusser's posthumous works (especially, *Sur la reproduction*⁴²) reveal that his research was advancing in this direction. Although he did not fully develop his motifs for various reasons (public and private), we can confirm, to our amazement, that he began to take steps toward a materialist theory of *ideological struggle* quite distinct from diverse current attempts characterized by a return of subject. Was Althusser entirely successful in his theorization of ideological struggle? We shall come back to this question in chapter 4. But, for now, let us explore the contents of his divergence from Lacan.

The Althusserian Real and a Project for a Materialist Theory of Discourse

Althusser's conception of ideological interpellation, despite all the aforementioned common characteristics it shares with Lacan's, is quite different in some fundamental aspect. In order to grasp this difference, one needs to understand clearly the singularity that the Althusserian real has in contrast to the Lacanian one. A relevant discussion is to be found, somewhat surprisingly, in one of his essays on art, entitled "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," which one should not mistake as simply addressing Althusser's viewpoint on art (though it does this, too).

In this short but extraordinary essay, Althusser describes how Leonardo Cremonini's painting evolved over time from the early naturalistic period to the later anti-humanistic period. During the early period, Cremonini focused on the continuity found between men and their things, to the extent that there appeared the inverted continuity between things and *their* men. Changing his objects for painting from geological objects, such as "islands"

⁴² Althusser, *Sur la reproduction* (Paris: PUF, 1995).

or “rocks at the edge of an empty sea” (*LP*, 231), to vegetables and animals and finally to men, Cremonini depicted various relationships of *similarities*. His rocks, vegetables, animals and men all appear to be extensions of one another: “motionless sheep whose bones pierce their skin and snap in the paralysis of movement; flocks resembling the rock piles on which they graze; dogs frozen in a bronze rut; dismembered animals scattered among men collecting bony carcasses, men like the carcasses they bear on their emaciated shoulders” (*LP*, 232). Not only did Cremonini depict similarities between men and things or between subjects and objects, but also similarities between painters and their works of art and between works of art and their viewers. Through his personal history as a painter, Cremonini reproduced the whole cycle of a natural History passing from rocks to plants, to animals, and to men, and again to artists, to art works, and to art viewers; he found thus what Althusser calls “the order of *Genesis* (even a materialist one), i.e. of a *descent* from an origin containing the *true* meaning of things, the true relationship between man and nature, and his ‘objects,’ above all the exemplary relationship between the craftsman and his material, his tools and his product” (*LP*, 233).

How can one resist the temptation to associate this order of genesis, for example, with the *hermeneutic circle* of art, artists, and art works, described by Heidegger in his famous essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art”?⁴³ Yet, while painting such similarities between men and their things or between things and their men, Althusser argues, Cremonini also started to paint *differences* that these men-things or things-men have from

⁴³ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 15-87.

our ideas of them, or, more precisely, “from the nature fixed for them by our ‘idea,’ i.e. by the ruling ideology, of men” (*LP*, 232). This “silent” tendency to depict differences slowly intensified until it finally realized itself, in his later paintings, as an independent logic of difference irreducible to the isomorphic logic of a circling circle.

During the later period, Cremonini painted the relations between men themselves—not the inter-subjective relations formed between two or more men but the ideological *auto-subjective* relations of men and their own images on mirror. What is unusual about his later paintings is not that there is found at the center of the paintings the structure of an infinite series of concentric circles ceaselessly reversing and expanding the relationship between men and their reflections on mirror (or between the reflections and *their* men); what is astonishing is, rather, that, alongside this dominant circular structure, there has emerged yet another structure of *vertical lines* which expresses itself in doors, windows partitions, walls, and so on. According to Althusser, this vertical structure depicts the invisible *weight* that the circle at the center seems to be oblivious about. It depicts the weight, not in a positive way, but in a *negative* way, as traces and structural effects produced on the circular structure itself. It depicts it, in other words, in its absence, as an “absent cause.”

The men and their objects refer us to the objects and their men, and *vice versa*, endlessly. And yet, the meaning of this circle is fixed, *behind the scenes*, by its *difference*: this difference is nothing but the presence, *alongside* the circle, of the great *verticals* of weight, which ‘depicts’ *something other than* the perpetual reference of human-individuals to object-individuals and *vice versa* to infinity, something other than this circle of ideological existence, by a different, *non-circular* structure, by a law of quite a different nature, a weight which is irreducible to any Genesis, and haunts all Cremonini’s later canvases in its determinate absence. (*LP*, 235-36; original emphasis)

The circular structure mirroring objects to their men, and *vice versa*, according to Althusser, is the structure of *desire*: “we see her naked desire on the back of the looking-glass she holds in her hand: it is their [i.e. women’s] mirrors that see them, and see the circle of their sight, though their mirrors are blind” (Ibid.) Such a circular structure of desire formed between subjects and objects is not so different from the structure that Lacan analyzes while explaining the formation of the desiring subject, namely the structure of the circling square, as it were, that Lacan inserts between the barred subject and the *objet petite a* in his formula of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$).

A crucial difference emerges, however: in the case of Lacan, it is presumed that the circular structure *alone* sufficiently explains the relationship of desire that the subject has with its object. What the subject desires is, in fact, its own loss; it desires, as we already discussed in chapter 2, “the binary signifier” which is nothing but the primal-repressed part of the subject’s own being. It is the pre-subject’s self-submission to language or the symbolic itself that produces this loss, which turns into the ghostly surplus object that accompanies or haunts all the empirical objects it desires. It desires those objects insofar as they carry in themselves more than themselves, insofar as they incarnate in some way the *objet petit a* and thus fill the *void* made to the subject by its own entrance into the field of language. This circular movement is what Lacan tries to designate with his neologism, “extimacy”: the drive toward a foreign object always returns to itself, trying to snarl the object and then transport it to the most intimate space of the subject, for the

“goal” of the drive always coincides with its “source,” namely the subject itself (see *Se XI*, 174-86).

On the other hand, for Althusser as well as for the later Cremonini, the meaning of the circular structure located at the center cannot be fixed unless there appears, behind this structure, yet another structure of verticals that fundamentally conditions it. From this perspective, the void at the center, around which the circling movement of the subject occurs, cannot itself be considered *a subject* (even if it is formulated in the name of “the subject of *the unconscious*”); instead, it must be thought of as *a structure* or, more precisely, *an indication of another structure presented in the form of its absence next to the circular structure*. What does this structure of verticals depict? It depicts, Althusser argues, “the relations which constitute [men’s] *living condition*” (*LP*, 236). It depicts *the real* as “social relations,” “the relations of production or the forms of the *class struggle* in a given society” (*LP*, 236-37; emphasis added).

One should be extra-careful not to misconstrue Althusser’s words here. He is not simply saying that it depicts economy. Contrasting Marx’s dialectic with Hegel’s, Althusser in his earlier text, *For Marx*, argued that Marx’s dialectic does not have the typical Hegelian schema of concentric circles which, no matter how complicated it looks, is ultimately reducible to the movement of its (spiritual) center (*FM*, 101-02). Marx’s dialectic is different in kind; it has the schema of an *edifice* made of a heavy base and a superstructure on top of it. The point of this schema is not that the base (i.e. economy) determines the superstructure; Althusser vehemently criticizes such economic determinism, which, at best, ends up reducing the structure of edifice into another

structure of circle, whose center this time is occupied by economy itself. The point of the Marxian schema is, rather, that there is a fundamental *unevenness* present in the way in which different instances of a given social formation are related to one another. This is why the vertical structure that we encounter in Cremonini's paintings must be considered to depict not so much economy as *class struggle non-contemporaneous with itself due to all its heterogeneous dimensions present to it* (the economic, the political and the ideological).

Yet such a non-contemporaneity of class struggle as one's "living conditions" disappears from the sight as soon as one is seated inside the complacent circles of ideology, precisely as an ideological subject, looking only at the objects neatly arranged at their circumferences or their "horizon." This magical operation is what Althusser has in mind when he defines ideology as "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." He is cautious not to say that ideology is individuals' imaginary representation of the real. The imaginary relationship itself that individuals have to their real conditions of existence is *re-presented* by ideology. In other words, ideology has its own *social*, and therefore *material*, existence. It is itself a *part* of social relations, a part that nevertheless brings a strange effect upon the whole. It is inscribed in such a *double movement* of itself being a part of the complex whole and of, at the same time, covering, with its own ideological veil, the very complexity of the whole to which it belongs. It turns the complex whole into an ideological "totality" with a definite center but without a weight.

In his posthumously published essay, entitled “On Feuerbach” (written in 1967, just one year after the essay on Cremonini), Althusser explicitly discusses the issue of the topographical relationship between ideology and other social instances. According to him, it is the Feuerbachian theory of religion, in which God is conceived as the exteriorized self of man qua a species being, that provided classical Marxism with a foundation for its “pseudo-theory of ideology” (HC, 127). The idea that forms the backbone of the whole Feuerbachian project can be summarized in the following simple formula: “a subject’s *essential object* = that subject’s *objectified essence*” (HC, 95). In other words, if there is an object that is truly essential to a subject, then that object is nothing other than the subject’s own essence which has been objectified (whether it is recognized as such or not). Feuerbach sometimes changes terminologies in this formula, replacing “subject” with “being” or “species,” and “objectified” with “externalized,” “alienated,” “manifested,” etc. But his fundamental point remains unchanged: between subject and its proper object is there found a *mirror* relation or a *specular* relation, through which the *phenomenological bridge* between the two opposite sides is established. As long as this subject is allowed to have more than one object reflecting its own essence, there emerges in Feuerbach a structure of circle in which “the center is constituted by the constitutive subject, from which there emanates a space of objects concentric to this center,” or, conversely, “the circle of essential objects surrounding the central subject as his ‘horizon’” (ibid.)

This Feuerbachian theory, Althusser claims, was uncritically recycled as a basis for the predominant Marxist conception of ideology, whose structure consists of the

following three moments: (1) at one end, there is given, qua essence, an originary fact or empirical condition such as economic interests; (2) at the other end, there is found, qua phenomenon, the corresponding ideological formation such as state, religion, culture, art, and so on; (3) finally, between these two ends, there arises the theoretical need to trace “the *genesis* of the phenomenon.” This Marxist conception of ideology, in short, has a *structure of reflection* between essence and phenomenon, between center and periphery or between subject and object. Just as the Feuerbachian God or religion is considered the estranged essence of man, so is ideology considered by classical Marxism the alienated essence of economy (or *homo æconomicus*). Althusser argues that, in order to rectify this “ideological theory of ideology,” it is necessary to critically reconstruct the theme of the specular object, by substituting the theory of genesis with “a non-genetic theory of *historical irruption*, independent of a structural-functional theory of the ideological in its articulation with other [social] instances” (HC, 126; emphasis added). Of course, this theory of irruption is what we already encountered in our discussion of Althusser’s “Letters to D,” which were written just two years before this essay on Feuerbach.

This does not mean, however, that the Feuerbachian theory of reflection is of no avail to us, because it still provides us with a remarkable description of certain key features of ideology, even if only through “a veritable ‘ruse of unreason,’” as Althusser insists. The important thing is to know the limit of this Feuerbachian theory: what it is good for and where to draw a line beyond which this theory loses its descriptive power. Althusser writes:

[T]he category of the mirror, or specular reflection . . . defines, *not the relation between ideology and its real conditions of existence, which is external to ideology, but the relation, internal to ideology*, between two categories constitutive of the ideological: subject and object (essence and phenomenon). We may say that the relation subject = object is typical of the structure of any ideology or ideological formation. Contrary to the claims of the classical Marxist tradition . . . the category of reflection . . . is relevant *not to the theory of objective knowledge but*, without a doubt, *to the structure of the ideological*. . . . All ideology is essentially specular. (HC, 127-28; emphasis added)

It is probably here that Althusser, for the first time, criticizes the classical definition of ideology as a representation or a “reflection” of the real, and starts to develop his own definition, which considers ideology a representation of *the imaginary relationship* that individuals have to their “real conditions of existence.” We can clearly see, from this passage, that the difference between these two definitions concerns precisely the issue of how to think of the relationship that ideology has with its outside, namely, other types of social instances. To view this relationship as that of a simple reflection is to suppress the radical heterogeneity between the inside and the outside (or outsides) and reduce them merely to the two aspects of the single logic *internal* to ideology, because the outside here is understood as ultimately conveying the same logic as the inside does. Inasmuch as they constitute the inverted images of each other, their identity might not be so readily recognizable; it might even be possible for one to deceive oneself as if one were occupying a “materialist” position by privileging the outside over the inside. The trick is, of course, that this act of privileging the outside takes place only *after* the outside is already reduced to a duplicate image of the inside. Althusser finds in this Feuerbachian reduction the prototype of the Husserlian “transcendental reduction,” whose function is precisely to strip external objects of their existences (HC, 112-13).

Once the reduction of the outside is thus successfully carried out, it does not take long before an operation Althusser calls a “reduplication” occurs, an operation in which the object of the subject (or *one* privileged object among others) is reduplicated as the *subject of the subject* and thus turns into the Subject (God, the Sovereign or the Judge) to which the (first) subject is subjected. The specular relation of subject and object, in this way, necessarily develops into a structure of “moral accountability,” in which “the Second Subject serves the first as a guarantee,” on condition that the first subject submits itself absolutely to the Second Subject (*HC*, 130). Such dialectical reversals and expansions of the logic of reflection, of course, are strictly *internal* to the ideological space itself. For the apparent outside posited by this logic is not the *real* outside (the real “real,” so to speak) but only a projected image of the inside, namely the ideological itself.

In order to break with this logic, there must be assumed not another subject but another structure, which, while being unmistakably distinct from the structure of reflection, nevertheless *conditions* it from without. Althusser writes:

[W]hat we have so far called effects of the specular relation, which can indeed be regarded as such within the field of the structure of the ideological, *is not merely an effect of this structure*, but the *symptom* of what commands its existence and very nature. We must therefore reverse the apparent order of the effects of the structure, and say that *the specular relation is not the cause of the effects of reduplication and of submission/guarantee; quite the contrary, the specular structure is the effect of a specific absence which makes itself felt, in the field of the ideological itself, in the symptom of the reduplication of the subject and the couple submission/guarantee*. This absence is an absence *in propria persona* in the field of the ideological, but a presence *in propria persona* outside it. This presence is that of the ideological function of recognition-misrecognition, a function that has to do with *what is misrecognized* in the form of the specular relation of recognition: that is, in the last instance, the *complex structure of the social whole*, and its *class structure*. (*HC*, 131-32; original emphasis)

This “complex structure of the social whole, and its class structure” is what Althusser considers the real. It is not simply the economic infra-structure or the base but the structure comprised of all the heterogeneous instances, including the ideological itself. This complex whole as the real is both what is conditioning the ideological from without and, simultaneously, what is missing from it, what is *misrecognized* by the subject seated inside the ideological theater, for whom everything ought to appear as a part of a coherent drama contemporaneous to itself. Of course, insofar as the complex whole is what really causes the ideological phenomena, it cannot simply disappear from the scene; on the contrary, it necessarily leaves its trace if only in the form of “an absence *in propria persona*,” namely a vanishing point which, albeit infinitely approachable, is never in fact reachable because it is itself made of only a void. The ideological phenomena of repetition and redundancy (such as the redoubling of subject by Subject) are all *symptoms* of such an absence of the real cause; they are symptoms necessitated by the failed and therefore forever reinitiated attempts of the specular logic to *suture* the void from which the real cause is missing.

What makes this extraordinary discussion of Althusser’s even more extraordinary is the fact that he draws from it a unique *immanent critique of structuralism*. He contends that it is possible to believe one is doing a structural analysis of an ideology while remaining completely captive to “what the ideology *says about itself*.” Even if one takes extra steps to analyze what is *unsaid*, such analysis does not dramatically improve the situation insofar as it merely aims at recovering a *latent* meaning of what is said and thereby ends up in the position of aiding that ideology to discover a firmer and broader

ground. Althusser argues that structuralism of this kind is scarcely distinguishable from hermeneutics; it never gets beyond the concentric circles of the ideological space, since “bringing the structure of the ideological into relation with other, *isomorphic* structures does not undermine this structure, but has the opposite effect, inasmuch as this generalized isomorphism merely reinforces, merely *repeats*, the structure of the ideological” (*HC*, 132; original emphasis).

Explicitly criticizing Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of myths as merely repeating the structures of myths themselves, Althusser holds that such repetition (understood in the sense of repetition automatism or *Wiederholungszwang*) should be viewed as a “symptom” indicative of what is truly missing from the analysis:

[T]his isomorphism is itself *an ideology of the relationship between the levels of social reality*—that is, a negation of their differences under the dominance of the structure of the ideological, which has . . . [the function] of *imposing differences under their denial, that is, under non-difference*. . . . [R]epetition can never be anything other than the *symptom* of something else, realized in repetition by way of the denial of the repressed that surges up in the symptom. Thus *isomorphism is a repetition symptomatic of the ideological nature of structuralism*. . . . It is quite striking that we do not find a theory *of the different instances of the complex social whole* in Lévi-Strauss (*HC*, 133; emphasis added)

Now Althusser relates this issue to that of the difference between the two models of causality: expressive causality and structural causality. He argues that “the isomorphism of structures is the modern form of expressive causality. Structuralism is thus, in the last instance, a hermeneutics: the concept of structure is its theoretical fig leaf” (*HC*, 133–34). In contrast to the Cartesian mechanistic model of causality, which is satisfied merely to explain a transitive causal link from one part to another (or from one event to another), both expressive causality and structural causality aim at explaining how *the whole*

determines its parts. Expressive causality, as Althusser already explained in his earlier work *Reading Capital*, is a Leibnizian-Hegelian model, according to which the same essential causal structure is to be found everywhere, that is, as much in parts as in the whole; the analysis of one individual part, for this reason, can easily be substituted for by that of another. Structural causality, on the other hand, is a model developed by Spinoza under the name of “immanent causality” (a model later inherited by Marx and Freud especially in the theoretical figure of “overdetermination”).⁴⁴ According to this model, the singular way in which different parts are articulated or combined with one another within the complex whole is what determines the specific natures of the parts themselves; there are no parts with their own natures fixed prior to their mutual encounters, nor is there such a thing as a whole preceding and determining its parts in an *a priori* or transcendental way.⁴⁵ In *Reading Capital*, Althusser says:

. . . the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to *imprint its mark*: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that *the whole existence of the structure consists of its*

⁴⁴ For a relevant discussion of the concept of overdetermination, see Pascal Gillot, *Althusser et la psychanalyse* (Paris: PUF, 2009), p. 49 ff.

⁴⁵ Žižek argues that the Althusserian “triad of expressive-transitive-overdeterminate causality parallels the Lacanian triad Imaginary-Real-Symbolic” (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1993], p. 140). But, for Althusser, overdetermination (structural causality) rather corresponds to the real, *on condition that* this term “real” does not imply the Lacanian real (such as *das Ding* or the missing signifier) but *a complex social whole as a combination of heterogeneous elements or instances*. The fact that Žižek links “overdeterminate causality” to the symbolic, which, according to him, typically operates through a retroactive determination, eloquently shows his misunderstanding of Althusser’s concept of overdetermination. As we already saw, retroactive determination is the mechanism through which the ideological subject inverts/cancels the overdetermination and teleologically (re)constructs the genetic totality in place of it. Of course, the model of expressive causality is precisely what is established through such a teleological inversion. As for Lacan’s changing relationship with Spinoza, see Bertrand Ogilvie, *Lacan: Le sujet* (Paris: PUF, 1987).

*effects, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.*⁴⁶

Thus, it can be said that there are basically two different ways to think of structure. Either can we think of structure as some sort of transcendental *logos* infiltrating every individual part as well as the whole (just like the omnipresent spirit of God); or we can think of it as an ensemble of complex relationships in which parts encounter one another and so mutually cause one another in such a way that the whole causes itself (just like the Spinozist “*Deus sive Natura*”).⁴⁷ If we apply to society the first idea of structure, then we inevitably end up with “an expressive society, each part of which contains the whole” (*HC*, 133). If, on the other hand, we follow the second idea, then we face a society fundamentally characterized by its complexity, a society wherein no individual part can ever be reduced to another as well as to the whole.

It is important to realize that this is not an issue that structuralism externally has with its outside, that is, non-structuralism. It is, rather, an issue traversing the entire field of structuralism itself. To borrow Michel Foucault’s terminology, it is indeed a “point of heresy” *internal* to structuralism.⁴⁸ So much so that we may even observe that the two positions in competition were sometimes adopted by one and the same author. In his 1975 text, *Discipline and Punish* (more precisely, at the end of the chapter entitled

⁴⁶ Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, pp. 188-89 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ This is why the popular understanding of Spinoza as a pantheist is completely mistaken. Pantheism, which claims, for instance, that the whole universe is in a drop of water, is rather based on the model of expressive causality, insofar as it assumes that God is *in* an individual. The Spinozan God is not in an individual but rather between individuals; it is the *whole transindividual relationship* formed among individuals themselves.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1970), p. 100.

“Panopticism”), Foucault described the modern Western society as a society comprised of concentric circles of the same disciplinary practice, and asked: “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?”⁴⁹ Only one year later, however, in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault completely reversed this position and claimed: “The family does not duplicate society, just as society does not imitate the family.”⁵⁰

To return to our discussion at hand, let us ask ourselves: is it possible, then, to apply Althusser’s criticism of Lévi-Strauss similarly to Lacan himself? Is it possible, in other words, to criticize Lacan as a theorist of structuralist hermeneutics, who blindly pursued a schema of expressive causality in his theorization of the unconscious? The answer seems to be an ambivalent “yes and no.” According to a footnote added to “On Feuerbach” by the book editor, François Matheron, Althusser did not treat Lacan’s structuralism the same way that he did Lévi-Strauss’s (*HC*, 154; footnote 68). For Althusser, Lacan’s structuralism was distinct in one fundamental aspect: it sought the cause of the symptom not inside but *outside* the symptom itself, outside what the repetition automatism “unconsciously” repeats, thereby emphasizing the essentially *heteronomous*

⁴⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995), p. 228. According to Yoshiyuki Sato, Foucault’s model of power called “panopticism” *generalized* the psychoanalytic mechanism of “internalization,” the mechanism through which the subject interiorizes the external Other’s commandments and thus ends up establishing an intra-psychic system of surveillance (the super-ego), from which it can never find an escape. For this reason, Sato claims that the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* remained completely captive to structuralism, being unable to find a way to resist the power. He views Foucault’s later works on *The History of Sexuality* essentially as an attempt to avoid such a theoretical deadlock. See Yoshiyuki Sato, *Pouvoir et résistance: Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Althusser* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007), especially the first and third chapters.

⁵⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990), p. 100.

characteristic of the human psyche. The question is: was this enough? For Althusser also remarked that the recognition of such an outside (“another mechanism, irreducible to the field of any hermeneutics whatsoever”) only constitutes “the first, preliminary step toward recognizing what the unconscious is” (*HC*, 135). Insofar as Lacan defines this outside only in terms of *one single* social instance, that is to say, *language* or *the signifier*, his position regarding the issue of the isomorphism of social instances still remains problematic.

Here I would like to revisit Žižek’s criticism of Althusser, which makes use of Lacan’s claim that “it is Marx who invented symptom.” A small fact check seems to be in order. Although it is just as Žižek says that Lacan criticizes Althusser in a very pointed manner while discussing Marx’s concept of surplus value in *Seminar XVI*,⁵¹ nonetheless he does not seem to direct his criticism at Althusser’s structuralism (for instance, asking why disallowing any room for the subject’s subversion of the structure); on the contrary, it is Lacan himself who tries to defend structuralism against Althusser’s criticism of it. This is what Žižek never mentions in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (or anywhere else). He does not because he cannot; it directly contradicts his criticism that accuses Althusser as a theorist of “alienation” who were completely subordinated to the structuralist-functionalist ideology, which supposedly dominated the French intellectual scene in the 1960s. Žižek displaces the point of the debate and asks whether there is in Althusser some identifiable moment of “interpellation without identification” as there is

⁵¹ Lacan, *D’un Autre à l’autre (Le séminaire, livre XVI)* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

in Lacan. This is, however, not the same question that Lacan raises to Althusser while discussing Marx's "invention" of the notion of symptom in his *Seminar XVI*.

The point of the disagreement between Althusser and Lacan rather lies in the question of how to understand the category of the real. Lacan's claim is that structuralism is valid because "the structure is . . . real"; it is not merely a theoretically constructed fiction, but something that really exists in the studied object itself. Furthermore, Lacan argues that *a homological structure* is found across various areas of scientific study such as psychoanalysis, economics, physics, etc. Lacan particularly stresses this: "Homology clearly means—and I underlined it—that the relation is not one of analogy. It is indeed the same thing that is at stake. It is a matter of the same stuff insofar as what is at stake is the scissors' mark of discourse" (*Sf*, 45). This structural homology is what accounts for Lacan's assertion of the "parallel" between Marx's concept of surplus value and his own concept of surplus *jouissance* (*plus-de-jouir*).

Why do we find the same structure of "surplus" operating in such different areas of study? Lacan's reply is simple: it is because everywhere there is a structure that cannot help but follow the same mathematical necessity; the presence of a structure immediately implies that there is some surplus or exception "extimately" produced outside the system that subjects, insofar as they remain within the system, cannot access. This fundamental logic does not vary as we move from one area of study to another. Just as infants are forced to submit themselves to the law of language, so are workers compelled to submit themselves to the law of market. Language and market are not so different; on the contrary, they are identical, if we take them at the level of *signifiers*. Both of them are

networks of signifiers governed by the same structural law which necessarily produces a surplus. Whenever such and such pre-subjects enter a society of signifiers, the subjects necessarily lose something that entails the ghostly object called the *objet petit a*. Lacan argues:

A subject is what can be represented by a signifier for another signifier. But is this not something traced out on the fact that as an exchange value the subject in question, in what Marx is deciphering, namely, economic reality, the subject of exchange value is represented for what? Use value. And it is already in this gap that there is produced, that there falls what is called surplus value. *This loss is all that counts at our level*. Henceforth no longer identical to himself the subject certainly no longer enjoys but something is lost that is called surplus enjoying; it is strictly correlative to the coming into play of what then determines everything involved in thinking. And in the symptom what else is involved.⁵²

As we can see, Lacan here is trying to define surplus value in terms of the gap between use value and exchange value: “It is already in this gap that there is produced . . . surplus value.” Why? It is because, for him, the moment that use value is subsumed under exchange value exactly corresponds to the moment that the pre-subjects submit themselves to the structural law of a signifying network. Workers *qua* use values enter the market by submitting themselves *qua* exchange values to it. Thus they themselves become signifiers fungible with other signifiers. This subjection, according to Lacan, *in and of itself* produces what Marx calls surplus value. Therefore, there is no further need to ask why. “This loss,” he claims, “is *all that counts at our level*.”

Lacan, however, does not realize that it is exactly here that Althusser raises his own objection. From Althusser’s point of view, Lacan’s account of surplus value has nothing to do with Marx’s own. In order to see the difference does it suffice to ask the question

⁵² Lacan, *D’un Autre à l’autre*, p. 15 (emphasis added).

that Lacan never wants to ask: exactly how can a simple submission of the workers to a market in and of itself produce surplus value? Regarding this question, Marx's position in *Capital* is unmistakably clear: the market itself does *not* produce any surplus value. The market cannot do so precisely because it is based on the law of *equal exchange*. Only equivalents can be exchanged in the market. Therefore, surplus value is not produced by a simple submission of workers to a market, but precisely *to a particular kind of market that is dominated by the bourgeois class*.

Such bourgeois domination is not automatically implied by the presence of a market, no matter how well structured the market is as a signifying network. The bourgeois domination must be produced, above all, by separating workers from means of production. Capitalists' monopolization over means of production is the key to the specifically capitalist production of surplus value.⁵³ This is why, spending so much time, Marx delves into the past and unearths the historical process that he calls the "primitive accumulation of capital." It is "primitive" because it constitutes an absolute precondition for any establishment of the capitalist market. It is the process through which workers themselves are separated from means of production and thus newly created as modern

⁵³ Markets existed long before capitalism, but they in themselves never produced capitalist exploitation. Quite the contrary, precapitalist exploitation was carried out by other means, that is, without markets. This is why Althusser in his "Letters to D" insists that capitalism never originated from some prototype element (like market) but *irrupted* as an effect of historical encounter and combination of plural elements which originally had nothing to do with one another. Althusser states, "Those elements are above all: (1) the existence of money accumulated in the form of capital; (2) the existence of a great mass of "workers" who have become "free"—that is, stripped of their means of production; (3) a certain threshold crossed in the development of techniques for the transformation of nature—energetic, mechanical, chemical, and biological techniques—and techniques for the organization of labor (division, cooperation). History shows several situations in which only two of those elements are united, but not the third; in such cases no new mode of production irrupts, and the capitalist mode of production is not "born"" (WP, 62).

proletariats who have nothing to sell but their own labor force. Only after this process is more or less complete, the workers finally enter a market, namely the market that is now dominated by the bourgeois class. It is crucial that this process of primitive accumulation cannot be considered a purely economic process. It does not simply belong to what Lacan calls “economic reality.” It is rather a historical process of *class struggle with all its dimensions present to it*, from the economical, to the political, to the ideological, and so on. The capitalist market is only one of the effects, and not the cause, of class struggle. Class struggle begins well before workers submit themselves to the market. It even precedes any establishment of the capitalist market, because it begins with the preemptive strikes of the bourgeois class inflicted upon various kinds of workers, peasants, beggars, vagabonds, and so on. The struggle of the proletarian class, if it can be called a class at all at this rudimentary stage, begins only with a delay *as a reaction to such attacks of the bourgeois class*. This is why most of the class struggles of the proletariat have a *defensive nature*.⁵⁴

Can we say, then, that workers’ submission to the market produces surplus value if the capitalist market is already in place? Perhaps we can say it does, but not without qualifications. In order to uncover the secret of the capitalist surplus value, one cannot remain at the level of the market (the network of commodity signifiers), but need to go

⁵⁴ This was also Louis-Auguste Blanqui’s idea: “Yes, Messrs, *this is the war between the rich and the poor: the rich wanted it thus, because they are the aggressors*. Only they find it evil that the poor fight back; they would readily say in speaking of the people ‘This animal is so ferocious that it defends itself when attacked.’ The entire philippic of Mr. Prosecuting Attorney is summed up in this one sentence” (Blanqui, “The Trial of the Fifteen: Defence Speech of the Citizen Louis-Auguste Blanqui before the Court Of Assizes,” <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/blanqui/1832/defence-speech.htm>, accessed on May 20, 2011; original emphasis).

into the labor process itself. Marx is no less clear about this in his *Capital*. Exploitation never consists in the simple fact that workers sell their labor force in the market in exchange with a certain amount of wage. It takes place, not in the contractual process, but in the *immediate* process of labor. The capitalist has to literally squeeze the sweat and blood out of workers who resist such exploitation. It is not enough for the capitalist to simply *buy* workers' labor force. The capitalist must force the workers, throughout the entirely working days, to become commodities, like machines, which can be consumed regularly and with a maximum efficiency. Exploitation would not be possible unless the capitalist succeeds in this commodification of the workers, which is achieved in the labor process itself. Again, it is the capitalist—not the workers—who *initiates* class struggle. Just like a general in military armies, the capitalist must establish in his factory a commanding authority which is not only economic but also *political* in nature. It is political insofar as it institutes a *power relation* between the capitalist and the workers. The capitalist must do this by devising up, and applying to the workers, various strategies of exploitation including those that make use of physical disciplines and violence.

Discussing the issue of co-operation among workers, Marx writes:

We also saw that, at first, the subjection of labour to capital was only a formal result of the fact that the worker, instead of working for himself, works for, and consequently under, the capitalist. Through the co-operation of numerous wage-labourers, the command of capital develops into a requirement for carrying on the labour process itself, into a real condition of production. That a capitalist should command in the field of production is now as indispensable as that a general should command on the field of battle. All directly social or communal labour on a large scale requires, to a greater or lesser degree, *a directing authority*.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. B. Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 448.

In order to characterize this controlling power that the capitalist exercises over the workers, Marx writes, “in form it is purely despotic.”⁵⁶ He directly compares this despotic power of the capitalist to the power that ancient monarchs held over their subjects: “This power of Asiatic and Egyptian kings, of Etruscan theocrats, etc. has in modern society been transferred to the capitalist, whether he appears as an isolated individual or, as in the case of joint-stock companies, in combination with others.”⁵⁷

The specificity of the capitalist exploitation, therefore, does not consist in its recourse to a purely economic means of compulsion; it rather consists in its specific way to *hide* its extra-economic dimension *with its veil of economism, namely the bourgeois ideology that, once it is separated from politics in capitalism, economy can emerge as an objective sphere governed by a set of mathematical laws of exchange*. The secret of the capitalist surplus value (namely, how it is squeezed out of the wage-laborers) is hidden by the ideology of the *separation* of politics and economy. In his 1978 essay, entitled “Marxism Today,” Althusser argues:

The *arithmetical presentation of surplus-value* as the difference between the value produced and the variable capital advanced in the process of production. . . . can lead to an *economistic interpretation of exploitation*. Exploitation, however, cannot be reduced to this surplus-value, but must be thought in its concrete forms and conditions. That is to say, it must be thought within the implacable constraints of the *labour process* (extension, intensification, compartmentalization) . . . on the one hand; and the conditions of the *reproduction of the labour force* (consumption, housing, family, education, health, questions of women, etc.), on the other. Undoubtedly, Marx did not identify exploitation solely with the arithmetical

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 450.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 452.

subtraction of value. He speaks of the various forms of surplus-value (absolute, relative), just as he speaks of forms of exploitation.⁵⁸

Hence, Althusser's understanding of surplus value directly runs counter to Lacan's. For Lacan, there are always in society distinct spheres that are structured in a homological way. Each sphere, insofar as it is a network of signifiers, produces a certain type of surplus together with alienated subjects who cannot access it. The submission of subjects to the structure itself is the very cause of the production of surplus as such. This is said to be a *formal* phenomenon universally witnessed regardless of the differences in contents that individual spheres may have. Althusser's objection to this position is not what Lacan suggests it is. His objection is not that structuralism is wrong because all structures are mere fictions that exist only in theory, but that one cannot explain the meanings of those "distinct" structures if one does not explain first the *singular* way in which they are articulated with one another in a given specific social formation. From Althusser's standpoint, the separation between different spheres (at least, certain spheres) is itself an ideological illusion fabricated by the capitalist social formation. We are always already in the complex whole consisting of various social relations in their mutual entanglements. It is by the intervention of the bourgeois ideology of economism that this whole is divided into, at least, two distinct spheres. On the one hand, there emerges an economic sphere, in which a set of objective laws of exchange seem to govern all the circulations of men and commodities in a fair and calculable fashion. On the other, there surfaces a political sphere, in which only the "general interest" of the people which

⁵⁸ Althusser, "Marxism Today" in Gregory Elliot (ed.), *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster et al. (New York: Verso, 1990), pp. 272-73.

transcends all particular class interests is considered legitimate. *Class struggle is thus made to exit both spheres.* Commodity fetishism as the ever expanding circular structure of desire can be activated only after the market is separated in this way from *the scene of class struggle*. This is why the “really existing” structure of commodity fetishism, contrary to Lacan’s and Žižek’s belief, cannot explain surplus value. It is itself only an effect of a more fundamental ideology called economism that conceals from the market the very place where surplus value is actually exploited. Likewise, the alienation of workers in the market is not what explains surplus value, but is itself what should be explained through the real mechanism of exploitation. To conceive the capitalist exploitation in terms of alienation is only to fall back into a trap of bourgeois ideology. In order to see the secret of surplus value, one must get out of the market, get out of the “economy,” to see how the market and its commodity fetishism themselves are still conditioned by their outside.⁵⁹

To return to the discussion of the later Cremonini’s paintings briefly, this conditioning is what Althusser tries to bring to light by pointing out that there are indeed two radically different structures playing in those paintings. At the center there is the circular structure in which everyone’s desire is played out. The infinite inversion between

⁵⁹ In his “Le marxisme comme théorie finie” (1978), Althusser attacks the juridical illusion of politics which limits political practice to the officially recognized “sphere” of politics (the state) and thus considers it exercisable only in *party-form*. This illusion, of course, is also what feeds anarcho-syndicalism, which views the union activity of workers as a purely *apolitical* activity. Althusser says, “The old distinction party/union is put to a hard test, totally unforeseen political initiatives are being born outside parties and even outside of laborers movement (ecology, struggle of women, of youths, etc.), in a grand confusion, for sure, but which can be fecund . . . And naturally all this movement ends up questioning the form of organization of party itself, of which one perceives (a bit late!) that it is exactly constructed on the model of the bourgeois political apparatus . . .” (Althusser, “Le marxisme comme théorie finie,” *Solitude de Machiavel*, éd. Yves Sintomer [Paris: PUF, 1998], p. 289).

men and things is nothing but the fetishistic inversion through which men's activities are expressed in terms of the activities of things (the table, for example, that starts dancing around on its feet as it enters the market). But the meaning of this infinite inversion cannot be fixed unless it is first shown how it is conditioned by the vertical structure at the margin which depicts the "real conditions of existence." By writing *Capital*, Marx did not add another text to political economy. Instead he wrote a *critique* of political economy. The quintessence of Marx's work does not lie in his discovery of the structure of fetishistic desire in the market, still less in his mathematization of the market economy. It lies rather in his discovery of the invisible outside that conditions the structure of desire constantly circling in the center of capitalism. To see Althusser's point does it suffice to ask: if the secret of surplus value is already revealed in the first chapter of *Capital* that analyzes commodity fetishism, what is Marx doing in all the other ensuing chapters, tirelessly discussing the history of primitive accumulation, the historical changes made in factory legislations and regulations, the past and current ways of organizing labor with or without a usage of machines, the unique capitalist law of population that sets up an industrial reserve army at the margin of the capitalist society, and so forth. Marx's theoretical aim was to reveal the outside of the market by short-circuiting politics and economy that are kept separate by the capitalist social formation. Only such a theoretical short-circuit could shed light on the real places and the real modes of class struggle.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ In his "Marx in His Limits," Althusser identifies this "'separation' of the state" as "the number one instrument of any state of dominant class" (Althusser, "Marx in His Limits," in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian [New York: Verso, 2006], p. 116). Of course, to say that the separation of politics and economy is an ideology is not the same as to say that this separation is merely fictional or illusory; quite the contrary, it is experienced by subjects as an effective reality in the sense of *Wirklichkeit*.

Hence, Althusser's criticism of Lacan, as long as the issue of social isomorphism or homology is concerned, is not so different from the criticism that he makes against Lévi-Strauss, who, according to Althusser, "claims to draw his inspiration from Marx, but doesn't know him". In his 1966 essay "On Lévi-Strauss," Althusser writes:

As Lévi-Strauss does not know what the ideological is . . . , since he does not know what the ideological level is *in the complex articulation of a mode of production* and, a fortiori, *in the combination of several modes of production within one social formation*, he falls back . . . on the procedure and ideological temptations that worked (so well!) in the case of kinship structures . . . Rather than retreating, then, he forges ahead under the banner of the wrong sort of formalization . . . Either the same forms are *identified as homologous* with other existing forms . . . , *the forms of kinship or economic or linguistic exchange*; or they are ultimately identified with certain 'economistic' factors ('mode of life', 'geographical conditions', etc.) which Lévi-Strauss takes for the equivalent of a Marxist theory of the economic level of a mode of production, whose conceptual existence he knows nothing about. (HC, 27-28)

Criticizing Lévi-Strauss's point of view as a "functionalism" necessarily tied to a "subjectivism," Althusser rejects "the concept of the unconscious" that Lévi-Strauss uses, and further adds: "I would go so far as to say that the concept of the unconscious is no

In other words, the ideology of separation is not simply a false idea but a false idea that is also *material* because it is organized in the very materiality of the ideological state apparatuses. This materiality does not make the idea true but nevertheless effective. By misapprehending this point, a theorist like Miguel Vatter was led to believe that Althusser in "Marx in His Limits" not only affirmed such separation as the real underlying mechanism of politics but went so far as to consider it as a point of departure in search of a new materialist theory of the state ("Machiavelli After Marx: the Self-Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser," *Theory and Event*, 7:4, 2004, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/). However, as Warren Montag pointed out in "Politics: Transcendent or Immanent?: A response to Miguel Vatter's 'Machiavelli After Marx'" (*Theory and Event*, 7:4, 2004), Althusser in the same essay explicitly says, "It is here that we see the superficiality (and therefore sterility) of a descriptive conception of the state that is content to affirm that the state is 'separate' and 'above classes'. Such a conception is 'ripe' and ready to fall into the bourgeois theory of the state as the objective arbiter of class conflict. In reality, to shed some light on this question, *we need to bring reproduction into play*" ("Marx in His Limit," p. 120). Developing this position of Althusser's, Étienne Balibar later argued that Marx's essential break with political economy consisted precisely in his theoretical short-circuit between politics and economy or between the state and the immediate process of labor. See Balibar, "Le prolétariat insaisissable," *La Crainte des masses* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), pp. 221-250; "In Search of the Proletariat: The Notion of Class Politics in Marx," *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, trans. James Swenson (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 125-49.

more scientific a concept in psychoanalysis than in sociology or anthropology or history” (2003, 26). According to François Matheron, a copy of the essay on Lévi-Strauss was received in 1967 by Emmanuel Terray who later asked Althusser for a permission to include the essay in his forthcoming book *Le Marxisme devant les sociétés ‘primitives.’* In 1968, Althusser asked Alain Badiou what he thought of Terray’s proposal. We do not know what Badiou’s reply was. Although Terray’s book was finally published without the essay, we may well assume that Althusser’s criticism of structuralism was relatively well known and discussed by intellectuals in the *École normale supérieure*, where Lacan’s seminars were taking place at that time (he moved to the *Faculté de droit* in 1969 right after he finished the *Seminar XVI*). Perhaps, the “stir in the cafes” that, according to Lacan, took place right after his first session of *Seminar XVI*, in which he strongly defended structuralism, had something to do with Althusser’s criticism of Lévi-Strauss. Lacan in the second session explicitly mentions Althusser’s name: “Althusser was not very comfortable in it [namely, in the group of intellectuals classified by publishers as structuralists among whom Lacan himself belonged and felt comfortable].” It is by no means certain that Lacan read Althusser’s essay on Lévi-Strauss at that time. But it seems both Althusser and Lacan were aware of the point of their contention. It is about the social “homology” presupposed by structuralism, especially by Freudo-Marxism.

In 1966, according to Matheron, Althusser organized a clandestine theoretical work group with some of his students—Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Yves Duroux and Pierre Macherey—with the explicit aim of collectively preparing for a publication of a philosophical work provisionally titled “Elements of Dialectical Materialism.” Though

this work never saw the light of day, Althusser's posthumously published "Three Notes on the theory of Discourses," which were circulated among the group members at the initial stage of their cooperative work, allow us to trace the contour of some of his basic ideas for this collective project. If these notes had been known earlier, I think they surely could have helped us avoid numerous confusions regarding Althusser's later theorization of ideological interpellation. Yet what is more interesting in the context of our discussion is the problematic that he proposes in order to situate the object of psychoanalysis in the broad field of scientific objectivity: namely, the problematic of the articulation of "regional theory" (RT) and "general theory" (GT).

According to Althusser, psychoanalysis in its state has a form of regional theory but lacks a general theory. As a regional theory, psychoanalysis has a system of theoretical concepts designed to explain the structure and the functioning of its object called the unconscious. Due to the absence of the general theory, however, psychoanalysis fails to "provide objective proof of its scientificity" (HC, 41): it "strives to 'achieve closure,' but *fails to*; or, to put it in other terms, it tries to define its own object *differentially* (in contradistinction to other theoretical objects: in the present case, those of biology, psychology, sociology, etc.), but *fails to*" (40; original emphasis).

As Althusser indicates, there have been attempts to overcome such a situation, but most of them ended up merely reducing the object of psychoanalysis to that of another neighboring discipline. Two exceptional attempts were made by Freud himself and Lacan, both of whom refused to take such a reductionist approach. Even when they borrowed certain concepts from other disciplines, they were always cautious to determine their

object *differentially* from objects of other disciplines. But, for this very reason, Freud's attempt to produce a general theory for psychoanalysis lapsed back into the same old disciplinary isolation, merely constructing a theory of "metapsychology," in which concepts of the regional theory were paradoxically reproduced under different names merely marked by their hollow claims to generality.

Althusser argues that Lacan's theoretical effort to elaborate the relationship between psychoanalysis and linguistics definitely showed a possibility of overcoming such an isolation of the regional theory, insofar as he did not just try to understand their negative relationship in terms of what distinguishes the object of psychoanalysis from that of linguistics, but their positive relationship as well by investigating what makes them approach each other, what makes them *similar*. Here, what Althusser has in mind is, of course, Lacan's famous thesis: "the unconscious is structured *like* language."⁶¹ By inserting the small preposition, "like," in his major thesis on the relationship between psychoanalysis and linguistics, Lacan successfully emphasized both the difference and the similarity between the two scientific objects, and thus brought about effects mutually beneficial to both disciplines. "Lacan is led to clarify," says Althusser, "not only the

⁶¹ In *Seminar III*, Lacan argues: "If I say that everything that belongs to analytic communication has the structure of language, this precisely does not mean that the unconscious is expressed in discourse. The *Traumdeutung*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Jokes* make this transparent—nothing in Freud's detours is explicable unless it is because the analytic phenomenon as such, whatever it may be, isn't a language in the sense in which this would mean that it's a discourse—I've never said it was a discourse—but is structured like a language. This is the sense in which it may be called a phenomenal variety, and the most revealing one, of man's relations to the domain of language. Every analytic phenomenon, every phenomenon that comes from the analytic field, from the analytic discovery, from what we are dealing with in symptoms and neurosis, is structured like a language" (Lacan, *The Psychoses, 1955-56 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III)*, trans. Russell Grigg [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997], pp. 166-67).

theoretical concepts of the regional theory of psychoanalysis, but also certain theoretical concepts of the regional theory of *linguistics itself*’ (HC, 44; original emphasis). He says this is because, whenever a general theory helps a regional theory clarify about itself, it necessarily brings about “the *same effect of rectification-reclassification*” on the concepts of the other regional theory in question.

Immediately, however, Althusser points out that this Lacanian interdisciplinary operation still involves a marvelous sleight of hand, a sort of self-deception, by which “a simple confrontation” between the two regional theories is mistaken for a production of a general theory. The *general theory effect* that Lacan triggers through the interaction between the two regional theories (the “GT-effect” as opposed to the “GT in person”) should not be confused with a founding of a general theory itself, which is demanded by psychoanalysis and linguistics, *both* equally as a regional theory. It is due to the absence of such a general theory that Lacan is necessarily led to believe not only that one of the two regional theories is the general theory of the other, but, moreover, that linguistics or psychoanalysis “allied to linguistics” can play the role of the “mother-discipline” of *all* the other human sciences. Althusser claims that this is precisely where Lacan’s suspicious relationship with Lévi-Strauss comes to matter fully.

[T]he general theory towards which Lacan is working . . . is not perfectly *situated* in its status of general theory [so that] what Lacan withholds from linguistics with one hand . . . he grants Lévi-Strauss with the other . . . although it is obvious that Lévi-Strauss imports linguistics into his own field in an extremely summary, non-critical way that has nothing whatsoever to do with the kind of ‘importation’ that we find in Lacan (which is, precisely, critical, differential importation). Although Lacan treats the relations between linguistics and psychoanalysis in a way that is epistemologically correct, *he assigns the (incorrect) use of linguistics by Lévi-Strauss the task and responsibility of ‘mediating’ the relationship between*

psychoanalysis and the other Human Sciences. (HC, 45-46; emphasis added)

What is the theoretical alternative that Althusser proposes, then? A development of a genuine general theory for psychoanalysis is well expected, of course. But he does not stop there; he suggests that there must be *two general theories instead of one*. Should the object of psychoanalysis be defined as “the discourse of the unconscious,” then there must be two general theories concerned with the two aspects of the same object: the aspect of *the unconscious* and that of *the discourse*. Insofar as the unconscious is a kind of *discourse* made up of signifiers, psychoanalysis requires *the general theory of the signifier*. But the signifier in question here is not just any signifier but specifically that of *the unconscious*; hence, there ought to be another general theory that allows us to think of its singularity not only in relation to other types of discourses such as art, science and ideology but also to non-discursive practices (for instance, economic practices) that are articulated with it. Althusser eventually identifies this second general theory with *the general theory of historical materialism*.

I have no intention to go into details of what Althusser calls the general theory of the signifier here. Instead, I would simply like to note two points that are closely related to each other. First, what Althusser calls the signifier is never limited to the linguistic kind. Thus we see that, after distinguishing the four major types of discourses (science, art, ideology and the unconscious), Althusser *adds* yet another class of signifier that partly overlaps with those four discursive types, namely, *language*. He claims that, if “the signifiers of language [*langue*] are morphemes (material: phonemes),” the signifiers of those four discourses include not only words but many other elements such as concepts,

sounds, colors, gestures, modes of behaviors, feelings, and fantasies (HC, 50-51). In short, he never wanted to even out singularities of different types of signifiers.

Second, Althusser clearly distinguished the level of discourse from that of language. Toward the end of his third “Note,” he puts into question “the opposition language/speech [*langue/parole*],” and argues:

Speech [*parole*] raises a very different problem, secondary with regard to the problem preceding it: that of the discourses. For a speech [*une parole*] occurs *only in a discourse*. / The opposition language [*langue*]/discourse is theoretically pertinent, but it would no longer have the same status as the opposition language/speech; it may well be the concept of a language [*langue*] that will prove inadequate in our opposition, since we are assigning the concept of discourse a much broader meaning than the one authorized by linguistics in its current state. Perhaps the concept of language [*langage*] would become pertinent again: language would designate the structure of any discourse, and thus play vis-à-vis discourse (in the broad sense in which we use the term) the same role as the concept of language [*le concept de langue*] played vis-à-vis ‘linguistic’ discourse in the narrow Saussurean sense (what Saussure has in mind when he pronounces the concept *speech*)” (HC, 81-82; original emphasis).

As we can clearly see, Michel Pêcheux’s crucial distinction between language and discourse that we already discussed in the previous section actually came from Althusser. Not only does Althusser here hold that the level of discourse should be theorized as distinct from that of language understood in the sense of *langue*, but also claims that a *parole*, which belongs to the performative dimension in a Butlerian sense, always takes place, not at the level of language or at the level of the opposition of *langue /parole*, but at the level of discourse. Although Althusser does not explicitly relate this distinction to the question of class division here, we can nevertheless confirm that it is such an idea of Althusser’s that Pêcheux took and developed in his *Language, Semantics and Ideology* in

order to approach the issue of ideological class struggle.⁶²

In any case, what we learn from these two points concerning the general theory of the signifier is that Althusser was extremely careful not to reduce different levels of social practices. And it is also in this context that we may understand why he proposed two general theories instead of one, thereby distancing himself from Lacan's position that seemed to overemphasize the dominance of the *single* general law of the signifier (the law of language). After claiming that there are required for psychoanalysis "a specified form of combination of two GTs, the GT of the signifier and the GT of historical materialism," Althusser states:

Naturally this case will seem 'special' to us if we cling to an idea of the GT mired in *the Aristotelian categories* of inclusion and subsumption. On this conception of 'generality', which it seems to us absolutely necessary to reject, the GT maintains relations of extension with its RTs (since every RT is *included in its* GT, one GT is enough to account for an RT). On this conception, an RT cannot depend on *two GTs*; it can depend on just one. *There is a lingering echo of this conception, perhaps, in what one suspects is Lacan's temptation (and that of some of his disciples) to take linguistics (regarded as the GT of the signifier) for the GT of the RT of psychoanalysis.* One would have to ask whether the principle of differential articulation does not also apply between GTs . . . In other words, if we do not think the possibility of an articulation between GTs, we will remain at the level of the *parallelism of the attributes* and of the temptation that constantly accompanies it, the *conflation* of the attributes. *The parallelism of the attributes is tempered and corrected in Spinoza by the concept of substance:* the different attributes are attributes of *one and the same substance*. It is the concept of *substance* which plays the role of the concept of the articulation of the attributes . . . The distinction between attributes is possible only on condition that they are articulated. Let us revert to our own terminology: the distinction between the GTs (which are our attributes) is possible only on condition that they are differentially articulated. (*HC*, 64-65; emphasis added)

According to Matheron, in a letter he sent to Balibar on 14 October 1966, Althusser

⁶² We shall come back to this issue of ideological struggle in Althusser in chapter 4.

wrote, in an explicit reference to Spinoza, that the aforementioned collective work on “Elements of Dialectical Materialism” would become “a true work of philosophy that can stand as [their] *Ethics*” (HC, 43). No doubt, the content of the passage above was what Althusser had in mind when he made this comment. He condemns the *teleology* involved in the Aristotelian hierarchy of species and genus, in which it is claimed that a species can only be subsumed under one single genus, which in turn becomes a species for yet another single higher genus, and so on. Until the highest genus is finally reached in this way, this operation of simple subsumption is supposed to go on without any possibility of bifurcation or digression, for otherwise it would be impossible to construct a coherent system centered on one single *telos* or *logos* exhaustively encompassing all the incidents that may possibly occur. Inasmuch as this single universal logic is to be realized at every level of the hierarchy, it becomes necessary, if one adopts this position, to postulate what Althusser here calls “the parallelism of attributes.”

The “parallelism” between the two attributes—Thought and Extension—is often wrongly ascribed to Spinoza. But the fact of the matter is that Spinoza never employed such a terminology; it is actually Leibniz who theorized the psychophysical “parallelism” between the mind and the body in order precisely to explain how the two different “substances,” while they are not supposed to interact causally with each other, can still have a certain relationship of “correspondence” (of course, for Leibniz, this correspondence is ultimately guaranteed by the pre-established harmony of the divine

monad, God).⁶³ The simple fact that there is only *one* Substance in Spinoza's system, on the other hand, obviates the need to account for such "correspondence." As Althusser suggests, what we find in Spinoza is rather a theory of the articulation or imbrication, as I would like to call it, of heterogeneous attributes, a theory that allows us to think of the *permanent excess and overdetermination of the order of the imaginary over that of the real*.

Although this is clearly not a place to discuss Spinoza in depth, I still think it is necessary to see briefly what is at stake. Spinoza's proposition that is often misinterpreted as advocating a "parallelism" between Thought and Extension is the famous seventh proposition of part II of *Ethics*, which states, "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."⁶⁴ What one should pay attention to, though, is the fact that Spinoza never really said that the order and connection of ideas are the same as the order and connection of *bodies*; instead, he said they are the same as the order and connection of *things*. As long as what he called "things" include *ideas themselves* as well as bodies and other types of modes, this proposition ought to be understood as saying that the order and connection of causes, under whatever attribute they are perceived, always remain identical to themselves and therefore equally substantial. Thus, we observe that in *Ethics* Spinoza considers even the causal connection of *imaginary (false) ideas themselves* as substantial as the causal connection of bodies, let alone that of

⁶³ Leibniz says, ". . . I have established a perfect parallelism between what takes place in the soul and what takes place in matter . . ." (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Considerations on the Doctrine of a Universal Spirit," in George Martin Duncun [ed. & trans.], *The Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, 2nd ed. [New Haven: Morehouse & Taylor Company, 1908], p. 142).

⁶⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, p. 247.

correct ideas. Of course, this does not mean that Spinoza denied that there is an identity between a mode of extension and an idea of this mode; but he thinks of this identity not according to the model of parallelism but that of the articulation or imbrication (overlapping and differentiation) of different attributes. Such imbrication is indeed what introduces the element of radical complexity and openness into his concept of *Deus sive Natura*.⁶⁵

Yet, is not this exactly what is at issue when Althusser criticizes Lacan for having taken for granted the idea that there is required only one general theory for the regional theory of psychoanalysis: namely, the general theory of the (linguistic) signifier? By overlooking the theoretical need to elaborate the complex ways in which heterogeneous objects (social instances or social “attributes”) are articulated with one another, Lacan regressed to a structuralist version of the Leibnizian parallelism, arguing for the logic of *social homology*, which was just as central to Lévi-Strauss’s idealist conception of society. Hence, this is a debate *internal* to structuralism, which took place between its two factions, namely, the Leibnizian-Hegelian party of expressive causality and the Spinozist party of immanent causality (or structural causality). Against Lacan’s regressive tendency toward the teleology of structuralist parallelism, Althusser, from the beginning, took every effort to stress the complexity of social relations or practices that is irreducible to a single transcendental logic of one social practice (language).

It is true that Althusser soon gave up such a meta-theoretical project of constituting

⁶⁵ See Balibar’s discussion of Spinoza’s rejection of the question of the “correspondence” of attributes in his essay, “Individualité, causalité, substance: Réflexions sur l’ontologie de Spinoza,” in E. Curley and P.-F. Moreau (eds.), *Spinoza: Issues and Directions* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1990), pp. 58-76.

general theories for psychoanalysis and other regional theories. However, this does not mean that he later came to accept the Lacanian idea of social homology. Quite the contrary, he carried himself ever away from it, as this is easily confirmed through a reading of his ensuing texts. In his 1978 essay, entitled “On Marx and Freud,” Althusser practically came to declare the ultimate unfeasibility of the Freudo-Marxist project to conceive a Marxist theory of ideology *on the basis of theoretical parallels or analogies* that one can draw between Marxism and Freudianism. Althusser argues:

Perhaps without knowing it during the first years (but he realized it very quickly), [Freud] touched on theoretically *the most sensitive point* of the entire system of bourgeois ideology. The paradox is that Freud, with the exception of a few random and debatable essays (*Totem and Taboo*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, etc.), never truly attempted to embrace as a whole that bourgeois ideology that he was unsettling at its most sensitive point. Let us go further: he was in no position to do so, for to do that he would have to have been Marx. He was not Marx; he had *an entirely different object*. . . . *Freud’s object is not Marx’s object*. (WP, 117; original emphasis)

Althusser says that, except in a few random texts, Freud never attempted to theoretically conceive of ideology, which fundamentally fell into the domain of Marx’s historical science, for, if he had tried, he would have to have become Marx. What is, then, the nature of their difference? And what happened in those few exceptional texts in which Freud actually tried to analyze ideology? A couple of paragraphs down, Althusser continues:

. . . *Marx was unable to go beyond a theory of social individuality or historical forms of individuality*. There is nothing in Marx that anticipates Freud’s discovery; *there is nothing in Marx that can ground a theory of the psyche*. / In those essays of unfortunate generalization, however, Freud in fact did not stop *repeating* in questionable conditions what he had discovered *elsewhere*. Now what he had discovered bore in no way on “society” or “social relations” but on very particular phenomena affecting *individuals*. Although it has been possible to maintain that there is a “transindividual” element in the unconscious, it is in any event within *the*

individual that the effects of the unconscious become manifest, and it is *on the individual* that therapy operates, even if it requires the presence of another individual (the analyst) to transform the existing effects of the unconscious. That difference suffices to distinguish Freud from Marx. / *It distinguishes them even if one can find strange resemblances in the respective conditions of their discovery.* (WP, 118; emphasis added)

Hence, one of the major differences between Freud and Marx can be located in the gap that separates the level of the individual from that of the social. Ever since Plato in his *Republics* drew the famous analogy between the two levels—the individual and the social, each having three subdivisions parallel to those of the other, namely, the head, the heart, and the stomach on the one hand and the guardians, the auxiliaries and the workers (peasants, craftsmen) on the other—idealism has never stopped repeating or reproducing such parallelistic representations, displacing the isomorphic logic from one domain to another. The family or the familial apparatus, which is also supposed to have the same structure of triple division (father, mother and the child), is often inserted between the level of the individual and that of the social, mediating and uniting them under the same roof of the triplistic hierarchical structure. This transfer of the logic (*logos*) is what Althusser calls Freud’s “unfortunate generalization,” namely, the generalization that reproduces what he discovered “elsewhere.” Hence, Althusser’s argument here is not so different from what was claimed by the Michel Foucault of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, who criticized Freudo-Marxism (especially its “repressive hypothesis”) by claiming that “the family does not duplicate society, just as society does not imitate the family.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990), p. 100.

The ambition to discover the one and only structural logic that encompasses all the instances or domains of the social whole was for Althusser only an impossible idealist dream of *Absolute Science* that completely escapes the field of ideology, that is to say, *all* ideology. If Lacan, mathematizing his psychoanalytic theory, was more and more attracted to such a dream (even if he failed in the end, as we already discussed in chapter 2), it seems Althusser was conversely more and more drawn to the view that sees the articulation of different instances, not as a question of generalization (i.e., general theory) but as a question of *clinical analysis* that heeds the specific ways in which plural heterogeneous logics or structures encounter one another *within* history.⁶⁷ In fact, this seems to be why Althusser at the last stage of his life is led to finally cancel his long held belief in the discourse of “the last instance” and turned toward what he called a “philosophy of the encounter” or a “materialism of the aleatory.”⁶⁸ Although this “turn,” it seems to me, never actually solved Althusser’s dilemmas regarding the problems of

⁶⁷ In fact, is not a similar issue at stake when, in an interview with Foucault held right after the publication of the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, Jacques-Alain Miller, on behalf of psychoanalysis (especially Lacan’s), attacks Foucault by asserting that “sexuality isn’t historical in the sense that everything else is, through and through from the start. There isn’t a history of sexuality in the way that there is a history of bread” (Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” in Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1972], p. 213)?

⁶⁸ Althusser in his 1984-87 interview with Ferdinanda Navaro states: “Let us say: *everything can be determinant “in the last instance,”* that is, everything can dominate. Marx said it about the political of Athens and about the religion of Rome, in an implicit theory of displacement of dominance (which Balibar and I attempted to theorize in *Reading Capital*). But in the superstructure itself, what is determinant is also its materiality. It is for this that I am equally interested in making evident the materiality, in fact, of all superstructure and of all ideology . . . as I showed regarding the ideological state apparatuses (ISA). *It is here that it is necessary to find the concept of “last instance,” the displacement of materiality, always determinant “in the last instance,” in each concrete conjuncture*” (Althusser, *Sur la philosophie* [Paris: Gallimard, 1994], 44; original emphasis). As for his “philosophy of the encounter,” see Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2006).

“the last instance” and of the articulations of different instances,⁶⁹ one can arguably say that he nevertheless pointed to us a direction of research appropriate for a production of a materialist theory of ideology.

By way of a conclusion to this chapter and in an attempt to demonstrate the undying potential of Althusser’s fundamental problematic, I would like to cite a passage with rich implications from Étienne Balibar’s recent interview in 2010, in which he states that the only form of Freudo-Marxism that is convincing to him is that of “disjunctive synthesis”:

Rather the reverse is true: I do not remotely believe in the autonomy or self-sufficient power of those processes of collective subjectivisation that could be defined as cultural or ideological, or claim that they unfold on the scene of the unconscious—on the scene of the symbolic or the imaginary—for the mediations in question are always economic in character. Perhaps all of this is not sufficiently grounded from the speculative point of view, and is a philosophy “*bricolée*.” But in this way we arrive at a notion of overdetermination without a “last instance,” or, more simply expressed, with two “last instances”; we arrive at the idea that ideology is a “base” in the same manner as “accumulation” or the “mode of production.” In other words, we arrive at a form of Freudo-Marxism. The search for a convincing synthesis of Marx and Freud has been, as it were, the “philosopher’s stone,” and perhaps also the great illusion, of two generations of Western critical theory. That is precisely what Foucault denounced so violently. For this is effectively an impossible synthesis, unless it is conceived in the “disjunctive” sense we have mentioned. For indeed it was Deleuze and Guattari themselves who provided the last great attempt at Freudo-Marxism with their work *Anti-Oedipus*. And to create this final form of Freudo-Marxism they claimed that they were forced to retranslate both Marx and Freud into the language of a new metaphysics of life. I do not have the power, and above all I certainly do not have the intention, to attempt such a thing. *I prefer to remain with a disjunctive synthesis. If in fact Marxism is a finite theory, Freudianism and psychoanalysis are expressions of a finite theory too, and it is at the point of intersection between both theories that everything must constantly be interrogated, from the perspective of the present, without appeal to any pre-existing schema of causality.* All of the problems of contemporary politics are concentrated at this point,

⁶⁹ As for this issue, see Balibar’s “Une rencontre en Romagne,” the preface for Althusser’s posthumously published essay, François Matheron (éd.), *Machiavel et nous* (Paris: Texto, 2009), 9-30; Warren Montag, “The Late Althusser: Materialism of the Encounter or Philosophy of Nothing?”, *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2010), pp. 157-170.

to the extent that they are an inseparable consequence of the unanticipated forms which capitalist accumulation has assumed, and of the equally unanticipated though perhaps entirely repetitive developments of what we may call the collectivisation of the unconscious (repetitive in the sense of the *Wiederholungszwang* or “repetition compulsion”).⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Étienne Balibar, “Philosophy and the Frontiers of the Political: A Biographical-Theoretical interview with Emanuela Fornari,” *Iris*, vol. 2 No.3 (April 2010), p. 51 (translation modified and emphasis added).

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION:

EMANCIPATION AND CIVILITY

Some people think that Althusser never spoke of the possibility of revolting against the dominant ideological apparatuses. This is a clear mistake. Not only are there his praise of the students' and workers' revolt in 1968, but there is his remarkable analysis of the critical effects of "materialist theatre" in *For Marx* ("Bertolazzi and Brecht"). To say that the latter is metaphoric is to miss the point, since, following the line of Brecht, aesthetics is seen here as a political practice.

Étienne Balibar, "The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser"

Revolutionary aspirations have only one possibility: always to end up in the discourse of the master. Experience has proven this. What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master: You will have one!

Jacques Lacan (Quoted in Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*)

The Question of Ideological Revolt

Perhaps the critical question that has most often been raised for Althusser is: how can the possibility of ideological revolt be conceived in his overall theory of ideology? We know from our experiences that the state apparatuses sometimes undergo crises and collapse; but is not his understanding of them too functionalistic to allow such a possibility? How can one think of something like a subversion of the structure (or of the

dominant power) if one turns down so stubbornly the idea of subject—not only the traditional originary subject but also the Lacanian subject of the unconscious, namely, the *surplus*-subject that, though produced as a mere effect of the initial submission of pre-subject to the order of the Other, nevertheless becomes the essential source from which springs a radical desire to subvert that dominant order?

It is, however, right here, in this very dilemma, that Althusser's approach to the question of ideological revolt must be grasped. For, if there is no Archimedean point called "subject" outside the structure from which an act of revolt originates, this means precisely that the cause of such an act must be found *inside* the structure, *inside* ideology. It is the idea of structure itself, in other words, that undergoes a profound change in Althusser, such that it can allow us to conceive of the possibility of subversion without presupposing a transcendental or metaphysical beyond. In his early essay titled "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (Notes on a Materialist Theatre)," which was written in 1962 and included in *For Marx* three years later, Althusser attempted to develop this line of argument while discussing Giorgio Strehler's production of Carlo Bertolazzi's *El Nost Milan* at Le théâtre des Nations in Paris. This was a play that, as soon as it was staged, came under fire and was mauled by Parisian criticism as a popular melodrama full of clichés and tear jerking sentimentalism. Against this criticism, Althusser resolutely defended the drama, claiming that, if "it does contain melodramatic elements, as a whole, the drama is simply a criticism of them" (*FM*, 133). This effect of criticism was achieved through a creation, within the drama, of a "dissociated structure" (147), which Althusser identified as the essence of the Brechtian "estrangement effect

(*Verfremdungseffekt*).”¹

Criticizing popular interpretations of Brecht’s notion of estrangement effect, Althusser holds that it is still not a matter of producing an external distance from the theatre but an internal yet critical distance within it. Central to the classical theatre was the spectators’ identification with the hero. This identification, however, was not simply a psychological effect that the audience experienced in relation to the hero as a more or less attractive individual; it was rather a specific ideological effect of what might be called the structure of *contemporaneity*, through which the audience gathered together in the theatre recognized (or misrecognized) themselves immediately in the play; they shared, with the drama, the same myth, the same theme and the same description of social situations (war and other things). “[T]he hero’s temporality,” in other words, “was the sole temporality” (*FM*, 147), to which even his opponents’ temporality as well as his audience’s was subordinate in the sense that they had to live “*his* time, *his* rhythm” in order to become, precisely, “*his* opponents” (*Ibid.*)

What the Brechtian theatre attempts to overturn is this order of contemporaneity. It does so by creating an “internal dissociation” between the usual *dialectical* structure of the hero and his opponents (presented in the form of tragedy or melodrama), on the one hand, and, on the other, the *non-dialectical* structure that presents the “empty time” of a

¹ Brecht describes the estrangement effect as follows: “This method was most recently used in Germany for plays of a non-Aristotelian (not dependent on empathy) type as part of the attempts being made to evolve an epic theatre. The efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience’s subconscious.” Bertolt Brecht, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” in John Willet (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), p. 91.

chronicle of the masses (or of their living conditions), a time in which hardly nothing happens or changes. To force such a dissociation to emerge on stage, the Brechtian theatre inverts the standard hierarchy of the two structures by placing the non-dialectical structure of the masses at the center of the drama while bringing the dialectical structure, regularly placed at the center of the classical theatre,² rather to its margins or wings. Without such an inversion, it would hardly be possible to create two clearly distinct structures within one drama; as soon as the non-dialectical structure is put aside to the margins, it would begin to function as a mere backdrop for the dialectical structure located at the center, thereby practically fading away into darkness.³

Hence, to decenter the traditional theatre as Althusser conceives it, it is important to introduce there what Althusser calls “the dialectic-in-the-wings structure” (*FM*, 142), a critical asymmetrical structure in which the dialectical construction of the drama gives its central stage to the hitherto invisible presence of the masses. This dialectic-in-the-wings structure, according to Althusser, is what forms the quintessence of the Brechtian theatre, and it cannot be reduced to what are typically and superficially recognized as sources of

² Althusser exempts Shakespeare’s and Molière’s plays from this charge against the classical theatre (*FM*, 143).

³ Brecht says: “The bourgeois theatre emphasized the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged ‘eternally human.’ Its story is arranged in such a way as to create ‘universal’ situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and every colour. All its incidents are just one enormous cue, and this cue is followed by the ‘eternal’ response: the inevitable, usual, natural, purely human response. . . . This notion may allow that such a thing as history exists, but it is none the less unhistorical. A few circumstances vary, the environments are altered, but Man remains unchanged. History applies to the environment, not to Man. The environment is remarkably unimportant, is treated simply as a pretext; it is a variable quantity and something remarkably inhuman; it exists in fact apart from Man, confronting him as a coherent whole, whereas he is fixed quantity, eternally unchanged. The idea of man as a function of the environment and the environment as a function of man, i.e. the breaking up of the environment into relationships between men, corresponds to a new way of thinking, the historical way” (Brecht, “Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting,” pp. 96-97).

estrangement effect, namely, calculated disturbances of the audience's psychological identification with the hero such as "the abolition of all 'impressiveness' in the acting, of all lyricism and all 'pathos': *al fresco* acting; the austerity of the set, as if to eliminate any eye-catching relief . . . ; the 'flat' lighting; the commentary-placards to direct the readers' attention to the external context of the conjuncture (reality), etc." (*FM*, 146).

To return to Bertolazzi's *El Nost Milan* (or Strehler's production of it), we can easily see why Althusser defended it so single-mindedly, rejecting all the charges that Parisian criticism brought against it. What the play tried to show was precisely such a dialectic-in-the-wings structure. The story line is rather simple, and it is set in "a cheap, poverty stricken fun-fair" in the Milan Tivoli in the 1890s. Although there appear as many as thirty actors on stage, the story only unfolds around three main characters: a poor girl named Nina, who secretly loves a young clown, watching him to perform perilous acts every night; then, Togasso, the "good-for-nothing," who exploits every chance he gets to seduce her with his money; finally, Nina's father, the fire eater, who is always anxious to keep her safe from all the evil temptations of the world out there. One night, when the young clown dies in a terrible accident, Nina's father sees Togasso in a restaurant trying once again to seduce his daughter, who, out of despair this time, has almost given in to his temptation. Enraged by what he has seen, Nina's father engages in a brutal fight with Togasso and kills him. Tragically, indeed—because the audience sees his intention to save Nina was nothing but a good one. However, when her father later comes to visit Nina at the night shelter before going to prison, something unexpected happens. She suddenly turns on him despite her recognition that he killed Togasso only for her own

sake. She turns on the myth and the lie that her father made up to spare her from the cruel law of the real world: namely that, if she continues to live her life as a good daughter, doing whatever she is supposed to do, everything will turn out fine. Nina cries out that this is a lie—a lie that did not stop the death of her beloved clown, and a lie that will also get her father killed in the end. Nina decides to leave the father's world of night and poverty to enter the other one reigned by pleasure and money. She will have to sell herself just as Togasso told her; but, at least, she will be on the side of freedom and truth. The play ends with the scene in which, after the father gives her a final hug and leaves, she goes out into the daylight, hearing the sound of the sirens informing that a new day has begun.

This whole story, however, is divided into three parts and speedily sketched out only at the brief ends of the three acts comprising the play. What occupy the other much longer portions of the same acts are rather detailed descriptions of the miserable Milanese: the rabble desperately trying to make it through the day around the fun-fair by doing whatever they can do (including begging for money, stealing, prostituting, and so on) (act I); the poor people gathered in a cheap filthy restaurant, mechanically eating and digesting their food (act II); and, finally, the unfortunate women who, having nowhere else to go, come to the shelter and spend a night, doing nothing meaningful (act III). It is this existence of the sub-proletarian or lumpen-proletarian masses that takes the center of the drama; the tragedy involving Nina, her father, and Togasso, on the other hand, is displaced to its margins, that is, temporally to the ends of the three acts and also spatially to the wings of the stage.

Althusser argues that Strehler's genius lies in his decision to bring out such a dissociated structure clearly on stage. It is only in the light of this "internal dissociation" that the great confrontation at the end of the third act can be interpreted properly—not only as the confrontation between the two characters (Nina and her father), but also as "the confrontation of a world without illusions and the wretched illusions of the 'heart', . . . the confrontation of the real world with the melodramatic world" (*FM*, 134). If the father represents the melodramatic consciousness acting according to the delusional "law of the heart," Nina represents, on the contrary, the emerging new consciousness that has come to grips with the cold fact that her safety is no one else's to take care of but hers, and that she can survive the real world only to the extent that she follows its brutal law, that is, only if she sells her own body to the market. It is true that Nina's consciousness has not yet achieved a clear understanding of the law of the world (a theoretical understanding, as it were). It still remains a consciousness that does not clearly know what it is doing, what it is up against when it leaves the old melodramatic world ruled by the father's moral norms. But it is at least a consciousness aiming at the real world, starting to explore it as is.

This rupture and its promise for another new world, of course, could not have been realized had not been created at the heart of the drama the irreducible tension between the dialectical melodramatic consciousness and its non-dialectical *other*. Althusser argues, "We are dealing with a melodramatic consciousness criticized by an existence: the

existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat” (*FM*, 135).⁴ Radically asymmetrical are the terms of the opposition themselves. On the one hand, there is the temporality of the “false” dialectic of the hero’s consciousness and his opponents’ (i.e., Nina’s father’s and Togasso’s); this is a temporality in which the so-called dialectical movement, despite all the apparent conflicts and bustles it contains, does not really produce any break from itself nor reach its outside but simply circles around in its self-enclosed logical space. On the other, there is the temporality of the non-dialectical movement through which “an unresolved alterity” intervenes and thus forces a profound change in the situation. Althusser argues that, “*strictly speaking, there is no dialectic of [ideological] consciousness [...] which could reach reality itself by virtue of its own contradictions; . . . for consciousness does not accede to the real through its own internal development, but by the radical discovery of what is *other than itself**” (*FM*, 143; Althusser’s emphasis).

How exactly is it possible, then, to sustain this internal dissociation of the two structures in the Brechtian theatre? Althusser argues that the non-dialectical structure is distinguishable from the dialectical structure of consciousness only to the extent that “it cannot be exhaustively thematized by any ‘character’” (1993, 145). In other words, what holds the two structures disjoint within the same drama is the very fact that the non-dialectical structure should never be reducible to a *subject* or its consciousness, because, as soon as it is thus reduced, it immediately turns into merely one of the terms (the opponent!) of the “false” dialectic of the hero’s consciousness. Therefore, it is of the

⁴ See Balibar’s discussion of such an existence of the masses at the center of the stage in his “Interview with Etienne Balibar,” in Beth Hinderliter *et al.* (eds.), *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 317-336.

utmost importance that the non-dialectical structure must be able to avoid any type of dialectic of the subject and establish itself *as a structure* within the drama.

Althusser relates this issue of “internal dissociation” to that of the audience’s consciousness. He rejects the two prevailing models of spectatorial consciousness: the spectator as a Supreme Judge and the spectator as a psychological subject identifying with the hero. First, Althusser rejects the misconceived idea of the estrangement effect, often held by Brechtean literary critics: namely, that the spectator can become a Supreme Judge who, if aided or directed by certain dramaturgical devices, can objectively evaluate characters’ various acts and their meanings from the standpoint of a transparent self-consciousness. He argues that there is no such extra-theatrical point at which the spectator may become free of ideology. On the contrary, the spectator is as much corrupted by ideology as the dramatic characters themselves are. He is always caught up in the ideological process of identification, always immersed in the unavoidable effect of the structure of contemporaneity. Hence, what one must do is exactly the reverse. One must learn how to turn the spectator into an *actor* by generating an internal distance within the theatre itself and having him absorbed (or reabsorbed) into this very distance.

Althusser argues:

If [the spectator] is kept at a distance from the play by the play itself, it is not to spare him or to set him up as a Judge—on the contrary, it is to take him and enlist him in this apparent distance, in this ‘estrangement’—to make him into this distance itself, the distance which is simply an active and living critique. (*FM*, 148)

Further down, he continues:

[T]he play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator—incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this

incompletion itself, this distance achieved, this inexhaustible work of criticism in action; the play is really the production of a new spectator, *an actor who starts where the performance ends*, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life. (151; emphasis added)

Life is the ultimate theatre in which every performance (critical as well as non-critical) must take place. But it is far from Althusser's claim that we, as spectators, must go out and seek something real in life; quite the opposite, we ourselves must become actors in the theatre of ideology, which *is* life. Only by virtue of an internal distance created in the midst of the theatre may the spectator's consciousness thus be produced as a new consciousness capable of acting critically in his or her own theatre of life.

Such a possibility of generating an internal distance within the ideological space—and not an external distance from it—implies that ideology contains in itself certain conflicts and contradictions that it cannot ultimately eliminate or cover over. What is the nature of such conflicts and contradictions? This question leads us to Althusser's aforementioned second rejection, namely, the rejection of the psychological identification model of the spectatorial consciousness. Carefully differentiating an ideological level from a "psychological" or "psychoanalytical" level (*FM*, 148), Althusser argues that the complex behaviors of spectators attending a performance cannot adequately be accounted for in terms of their simple identification with the hero. If we proceed in this way, we will just end up with a poor understanding of the complexity of the play. It is not just the hero's acts or speeches but the whole ideological contents of the play that the spectators identify themselves with. Hence, conflicts and contradictions involved in the play cannot themselves be approached at the level of a psychological individual subject but at "the

social and cultural-aesthetical level.” If spectators, while watching one and the same performance, show dissimilar and complex reactions, these reactions themselves should be studied at the level of social conflicts cutting across the very ideology represented in the theatre. Althusser argues:

We should not imagine that this self-recognition [i.e., an ideological identification] escapes the exigencies which, in the last instance, command the destiny of the ideology. Indeed, art is as much the desire for self-recognition as self-recognition itself. So, from the beginning, the unity I have assumed to be (in essentials) achieved so as to restrict the analysis, the stock of common myths, themes and aspirations which makes representation possible as a cultural and ideological phenomenon—*this unity is as much a desired or rejected unity as an achieved unity*. In other words, in the theatrical world, as in the aesthetic world more generally, *ideology is always in essence the site of a competition and a struggle* in which the sound and fury of humanity’s political and social struggles is faintly or sharply echoed. (*FM*, 149; emphasis added)

Let us first note that this position is certainly not the same as the “heroism of [accepting] alienation or subjective destitution” (*SOI*, 2) that Žižek accuses Althusser of; nor is it the same as the alternative model of heroism that Žižek proposes on his part, namely, the heroism of the subject fearlessly crossing the fundamental fantasy to arrive at the realm of the real placed wholly outside ideology. Althusser rather stresses that ideology itself ought to be conceived as “the site of a competition and a struggle.” Such an understanding of Althusser’s goes back to one of Marx’s different definitions of ideology—in fact, the *sole positive one* that, far from turning down ideology as a simple illusion, affirms it as the “forms in which men become conscious of . . . conflict and fight it out.”⁵

⁵ Karl Marx, “Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” in Lawrence H. Simon (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), p. 211.

Did Althusser thrust his way with this position far enough to uncover the specific mechanism through which an ideological revolt is accomplished not without but *within* the field of the dominant ideology? If he insisted on the idea that the state apparatuses are the number one issue of class struggle, Althusser did not seem to succeed in discovering a fully satisfactory formula to encapsulate this relationship theoretically. Of course, this does not mean that Althusser could not find such a formula because his understanding of ideology was too functionalistic or because his criticism of the category of the subject was too uncompromising. Rather, the reason for such a theoretical blockage is to be sought in the fact that he was still under the influence of *another* (this time, negative) idea of Marx's concerning ideology which considers the dominant ideology purely and simply the ideology of the dominant class: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."⁶ As we shall see soon, it is Étienne Balibar, one of Althusser's disciples, who later provides us with a convincing formula for ideological revolt precisely by criticizing this thesis of classical Marxism. According to him, the dominant ideology is not the ideology of the dominant; on the contrary, at least in fundamentals, it must be considered the ideology of the dominated themselves. Or, speaking more precisely, it is "a specific universalization of the imaginary of the *dominated*."⁷ Such a process of universalization, to be sure, is accompanied by various distortions and displacements; however, the dominant ideology can never succeed in its attempt to purge the trace of the

⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 67.

⁷ Balibar, "The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser," p. 13 (original emphasis).

voices of the dominated, precisely because the latter constitutes the very source of the legitimacy and the vitality that the dominant ideology enjoys.

This inversion of the perspective helps us to grasp, in a tangible manner, what Althusser might have meant by an internal distance produced within ideology itself. The possibility of insurrection is not to be found in an external distance separating the subject from the dominant ideology, but is internally inscribed *within* it. This is why a possibility of insurrection, like a specter, never stops haunting the dominant ideology. The masses engage themselves in a collective practice of subversion not by setting up another particular ideology for themselves that is distinct from the dominant one but rather by making the ideals inscribed in the dominant ideology itself *work in reverse*. Of course, in order for something like this to occur, the radical antagonism of the society must be made *visible*, in a given political conjuncture, in the form of the masses broadly excluded from the universal values that the banner of the dominant ideology has been shouting out (liberty, equality, justice, happiness, etc.). The antagonism must be made visible in such a way that Althusser illustrated with respect to Bertolazzi's play: the mundane existence of the miserable Milanese sub-proletarian masses had to be revealed right at the center of the stage before Nina's critical consciousness finally emerged into daylight. Yet, even when the antagonism is so made visible, the masses revolt not by occupying the place of the real (the antagonism itself) but by occupying the place of the *ideal* internally displaced by the revealed antagonism from the *fictive* moment of the same dominant ideology. They collectively attempt to realize not the real—the antagonism—but the ideal that the dominant ideology itself contains in the form of promises; they attempt to realize

the promised universality *right here and now*, no longer postponing it or transporting it to somewhere else.

Such a theoretical formulation of Balibar's also corresponds to Althusser's viewpoint on the imaginary and the symbolic. As we already discussed in chapter 1, Althusser, by rejecting the upper level of the graph of desire, takes issue with the Lacanian notion of the symbolic. His point is that, since the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic can never fully succeed, it should be considered to take place within the imaginary register itself, despite its gesture of going beyond the imaginary. The symbolization of the imaginary, in other words, can never arrive at its "destination" called the pure symbolic or the symbolic proper.⁸ Now, although Balibar reintroduces the dimension of the symbolic into the theory of ideology, he does so by identifying it with the *ideal*, which should not be confused with the dominant ideology itself that it haunts from the inside. By thus critically reconstructing the Lacanian schema of RSI (the real, the symbolic and the imaginary), Balibar relates negative or insurrectional universality to the ideal or the symbolic, while associating hegemonic universality to the fictive or the imaginary. This leads him to propose two different concepts of politics: politics of emancipation and politics of civility (*civilité*).⁹

From this perspective, it appears quite suitable to regard Althusser mainly as a theorist of politics of emancipation, and Lacan as a theorist of politics of civility. In the

⁸ See the discussion of the letter in chapter 2.

⁹ Although Balibar adds yet another concept of politics corresponding to the real, and calls it politics of transformation, the first two concepts are in our focus of discussion

next section, I will examine the debate that took place in the late 1970s between Althusser and Balibar around the issue of the state, and try to demonstrate how Balibar tried to modify Althusser's understanding of dominant ideology and ideological revolt. In the third section, I will focus on the question of politics of civility, and try to show how Lacan's theory of "the name of the father" can be seen as an important attempt to theorize it. Simultaneously, however, I will claim that Althusser himself, in his posthumously published texts on Niccolo Machiavelli (texts that can be viewed as containing his "philosophical secret"¹⁰), was drawn near Lacan's problematic in an unexpected manner, and developed his own *alternative* concept of politics of civility.

Inside or Outside?

The Debate between Althusser and Balibar in 1978

Let us begin by citing a long but highly intriguing passage from Balibar's 1993 paper, "The Infinite Contradiction," which he wrote as an introduction to the body of his work submitted to his professorship conferral review (*l'Habilitation à diriger les recherches*):

Similarly, I would not write (as in my 1976 book, *Sur la Dictature du prolétariat*) that the general form of development for democracy beyond its class frontiers lies in the dismantling of the state apparatus and generally in the decline of the state. For the political experience of the 1970s and 1980s has taught me (or so I believe) that *the existence of a social movement "outside the state" is a contradiction in terms. Indeed, it is on this very issue that I began to part company with Althusser in 1978.* And the course of thought I have tried to follow for the past ten years or so, either alone or in collaboration with Immanuel Wallerstein and others, which focuses on present and past forms of racism and nationalism, and their ambiguous combinations with class struggle, has suggested to me that class struggle experienced, thought, and organized *under its own name* is the exception, not the rule. Today I believe that what can be called *the theoretical anarchism* shared by Marxism and the entire

¹⁰ See Balibar's "Une rencontre en Romagne," the preface for Althusser's *Machiavel et nous*, éd. François Matheron (Paris: Texto, 2009), pp. 9-30.

libertarian tradition (whether socialist or not) is mainly responsible, at least from the standpoint of its theoretical component, for its inability to size up the crisis it has faced since at least the years of its confrontation with Nazism, and from which it has never emerged. And I believe, *a fortiori*, that it is not on these grounds that we are likely to contribute intellectually to solving the crisis of democratic politics that today threatens in different ways to open a new door to various neo-Fascisms.¹¹

Though Balibar simply recalls here that he and Althusser went separate ways in 1978, the debate in question actually began slightly earlier and involved many other people. In November 1977, Althusser contributed a paper titled “The Crisis of Marxism” to a colloquium organized by the Italian radical newspaper *Il Manifesto* under the title, “Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies.”¹² In this paper, Althusser, criticizing some of Euro-communist doctrines concerning party politics, argued that the communist party should, in principle, avoid becoming “a government party,” even if it should be allowed, under certain circumstances, to tactically participate in the government. Such an argument brought out strong reactions on the side of Italian communists and was severely criticized as a regressive thesis that keeps the party from advancing beyond its typical role of opposing the state, attributing the capacity of social transformation only to loosely connected heterogeneous social movements. Althusser, in response, tried to defend his position through a series of interviews and papers (including the famous four-part article published in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* under the title,

¹¹ Étienne Balibar, “The Infinite Contradiction,” *Depositions: Althusser, Balibar, Macherey, and the Labor of Reading*, Yale French Studies n. 88 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 157-58 (emphasis added).

¹² Althusser, “The Crisis of Marxism,” in Rossana Rossanda (ed.), *Power and Opposition in Post-revolutionary Societies*, trans. Patrick Camiller & Jon Rothschild (London: Ink Links, 1979), pp. 225-37.

“Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le parti communiste”).¹³

Balibar’s own intervention in this debate was carried out through his essay, “State, Party, and Transition.”¹⁴ His argument was basically twofold. First, he tried to show that the Italian communists’ critique of Althusser was largely based on their own misunderstanding: Althusser certainly did not want to promote the idea of “an opposition party,” but rather wanted to expose to a radical critique the very symmetry of a government party and an opposition party, a symmetry trapped in the Statist or Parliamentarist conception of politics. Secondly, however, this does not mean that Althusser’s position steered clear of difficulties. Balibar located the real problem by putting into question Althusser’s assertion that the party should remain “outside the state.” Let us read Althusser’s own words as appeared in his paper “Marxism as a ‘Finite’ Theory”:

This is why I feel uncomfortable with formulas of this sort, formulas admitting that the theoretical form of the “political sphere” in the phase of transition “should pass *through the party that makes itself the State.*” . . . If the party “makes itself the State”, then we have the USSR. I wrote a long time ago to Italian friends that the party should never, in principle, consider itself “a government party”—even if it may, under certain circumstances, participate in the government. *In principle*, according to its political and historical *raison d’être*, the party must be *outside the State*, not only under the bourgeois State, but, for a stronger reason, under the proletarian State as well. The party must be the number one instrument of the “destruction” of the bourgeois State, before it becomes (inexplicitly. . .) *one* of the instruments for the withering away of the State. The political exteriority of the party in relation to the State is a fundamental principle that one can find in Marx’s and Lenin’s rare texts on the question. (*Extracting the party from the State in order to return it to the masses* was Mao’s desperate attempt in the Cultural Revolution.)

¹³ This was published later as Althusser, *Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans la parti communiste* (Paris: Librairie François Maspero, 1978).

¹⁴ Balibar, “État, parti, transition,” *Dialectique*, vol. 27 (1979), pp. 81-92.

Without this autonomy of the party (and *not of politics*) in relation to the State, one will never escape from the bourgeois State, even if it becomes “reformed” as much as one wants.¹⁵

In his “State, Party, and Transition,” Balibar criticizes, at an unprecedented level, his teacher’s position regarding the communist party as “an ideal (and idealist) conception.”¹⁶ He points out that, although Althusser’s claim takes it for granted that mass movements or social movements exist outside the state, the masses themselves are never to be found in such an ideal position but always in places *internal to the state*, always to some degree ideologically contaminated by it. When such idealized masses do not exist, it is absurd to say that the revolutionary party must be extracted from the state and returned to the masses. Social contradictions are not to be formed between the state and the social movements situated wholly outside it; they can only be formed as contradictions *immanent* to the state. Hence, the position of the revolutionary party, too, ought to be sought *inside* the state. To say that the party must obtain its complete autonomy in relation to the state is practically the same as saying that the party can become entirely free of ideology, entirely free of ideological struggles, and therefore entirely free of internal contradictions, as if contradictions it tries to resolve could be all externalized in advance. Yet, such a pure position is never to be attained. The party, no matter how revolutionary it may appear, can occupy only an unstable position in the field of social struggles. It is itself always still penetrated by contradictions, always still

¹⁵ Althusser, “Le Marxisme comme théorie «finie»,” *Solitude de Machiavel* (Paris: PUF, 1998), p. 290 (emphasis added).

¹⁶ Balibar, “État, partie, transition,” p. 82.

swayed by the complex and oftentimes uncontrollable effects of the struggles of which it is a part. To deny this only results in paving the way to a dogmatism of the party, the kind we see, for instance, in Lenin's unfortunate statement: "the Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true."¹⁷ If the party ever becomes revolutionary, it is only to the extent that it constitutes itself, in a given conjuncture, as a *countertendency* to the dominant capitalist tendency, a tendency which is itself necessarily and immanently entangled with its contrary, and therefore cannot be isolated as such in a definite manner. The party can neither be the agent of the ultimate truth of history nor the place where all the class struggles can be brought in and finally settled.

This is why the "anarchistic" strategy of classical Marxism that tries to dismantle the state by mobilizing forces presumably located outside the state must be put into question. We see Balibar still strongly criticize the Marxist thesis of "the withering away of the state" twenty years later in his 1997 interview with Jean-François Chevrier and others which took place right after his book, *La Crainte des masses*, came out:

[T]he state, politics, citizenship, and the relation of citizenship to nationality were not future objects for Marxist theory but were inaccessible to that theory; they were not only momentary blind spots, but the absolute limits of any possible Marxist theorization. Not because of Marxism's much-decried economic reductionism, but because of its anarchist component. / I am not an anarchist. On the contrary, I think Marx was far too much an anarchist, and that Marxists after him have paid dearly for their dream of the withering away of the state. Marx even considered himself more anarchist than Bakunin; where Bakunin toppled the state with words, crying "Down with the state!" Marx aimed to topple it in reality, using the class struggle. But everyone knows what happened: the discourse of the withering away of the state

¹⁷ Lenin, "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism," in *Collected Works*, vol. 19 (Moscow: Progressive Publishers, 1977), p. 21.

gave rise to a practice which supported an omnipotent state.¹⁸

Althusser's 1978 position regarding this issue, however, was not a temporary one improvised according to the needs of the conjuncture defined by the urgency of the debate; it was rather firmly based on the theoretical argumentation that he developed, for example, in his 1976 essay entitled "Note on the ISAs." In the last section of this paper, we can easily see that Althusser had put forward exactly the same kind of argument that he did two years later on the topic of the relationship between the party and the state. He apparently wrote this piece in response to criticisms raised against his previous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." At issue were two closely connected criticisms: first, the criticism of his functionalism and, second, the criticism of his view regarding the party, namely, that his theory makes the idea of revolutionary party impossible.

The first criticism charging him with functionalism contends that Althusser excluded class struggle from his theoretical horizon by defining institutions (or organizations) solely through their functions and roles, and then reducing the entire society into a set of ideological institutions. Althusser, however, reminds his readers that, in his earlier essay, he did not really exclude class struggles but, in fact, added a postscript that rather highlighted the primacy of class struggle over the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). From this, he further deduces that the ISAs themselves ought to be defined as a site and an issue of class struggle. Inasmuch as the dominant class is marked by its inability to

¹⁸ Balibar, "Globalization, Civilization I & II," *Politics-Poetics Documenta X—the Book* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1997), p. 774.

produce the ultimate unity of its ideological materials at hand (forms and elements), inasmuch as it is compelled to engage, time and again, in a struggle to achieve such a unity without ever succeeding to do so, its system of ISAs can never be deemed a *fait accompli* or a transcendental horizon given to class struggle; on the contrary, it must be considered an unstable finite field exposed to unpredictable effects of class struggle.

The second criticism concerning Althusser's perspective on the party becomes more specific. It argues that he made the idea of revolutionary party impossible by considering all political parties indifferently as ISAs. For how can a political party ever be revolutionary if it should simultaneously be defined as an ISA? To this criticism, Althusser replies that he never actually claimed that each individual political party, in and of itself, constitutes an ISA, but something entirely different: namely, that political parties, individually taken, are considered merely parts ("*pièces*") of the "political" ISA called the "constitutional regime" ("the 'fundamental laws' under the monarchy of *Ancien Régime*" or "the parliamentary representative regime under the bourgeoisie during its 'liberal' period").¹⁹ Hence, it can be said that, from Althusser's point of view, the revolutionary party, far from being an ISA, expresses *the class struggle that continues in the middle of the ISAs*. This is why it is not simply possible but even necessary sometimes that the revolutionary party enters the parliamentary political space, if the class struggle of the proletariat in the country makes sufficient advances. But Althusser immediately qualifies his statement by saying that, even in this case, the primary goal of the revolutionary party is not to participate in the government but to find a way to subvert

¹⁹ Althusser, "Note sur les AIE" (SR, 256).

and destroy the state by engaging in a wide variety of class struggles unconfined to the parliamentary space. He argues that, even after a more or less successful revolution is accomplished, the communist party must not, in principle, participate in the proletariat's dictatorial government, because, if it does, it will easily turn into one of those "state-parties" that materialized in the socialist countries in Eastern Europe, indefinitely putting off the task of realizing its real end: "the withering away of the state."

In order to see the tenacity of the first criticism accusing Althusser of functionalism, it suffices to note that Slavoj Žižek's criticism, which has been widely popular for more than two decades, is basically of the same kind. Although it is true that Althusser already gave his reply to such a criticism in his "Note on the ISAs," and it was actually a fairly good one, nevertheless we ought to examine whether or not there was another blind spot that this reply itself missed (we will come back to this question later on).

As for Althusser's argument concerning the revolutionary party, it should be noted first that with respect to his use of terminologies there appears a certain oscillation. Althusser utilizes the term "state" somewhat interchangeably with other terms such as "government" or "constitutional regime" (which, at most, seems to include the legislative, executive, and judicial powers); but this is clearly a regression from his original position that the state is something that goes well beyond the boundary of the government, and that it includes institutions usually considered as belonging to the civil society, such as family, school, church and labor union.²⁰ It is true that, inasmuch as he is here dealing

²⁰ Before Althusser, Gramsci was probably the only theorist who acquired a similar understanding of the state. In his early theorization of the state, Gramsci opposed the civil society (hegemony) to the political society (the state), privileging the former as a site of resistance to the latter; whereas in his later period he

with the question of political parties, he is limiting his discussion to the “political” ISA. However, the claim that the revolutionary party must remain outside the “political” state apparatus is certainly much weaker than the claim that it must stay “outside the state” altogether. The outside of the government or the “constitutional regime” is not exactly equivalent to the outside of the state. For instance, in the place where the most basic kind of class struggle takes place, we still find the existence of another ISA called labor union. Even if it is justifiable to carry out class struggles unlimited to the parliamentary space, why should one hold onto the principle of “the political exteriority of the party in relation to the state” as well?

Another formidable question poses itself. Even if we accept Althusser’s argument that the revolutionary party in and of itself does not constitute an ISA but only a “part” of the political ISA, nonetheless we still can ask whether or not the revolutionary party operates through an ideology and therefore must have its own ideological apparatus or device (without this, it could not even be considered a part of the political ISA). Althusser himself is more clearly aware of this question than anybody else: “One will perhaps say that the communist party, too, constitutes itself, like all the other parties, on the basis of an *ideology*, which, furthermore, it calls the *proletarian ideology*. This is certainly so. For the communist party, too, ideology plays a role of “cement” (Gramsci) of a defined social group that it *unifies* in its thought and in its practices. For the

changed his position by making the state expand to include the civil society itself: “one might say that State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion” (Antonio Gramsci, “State and Civil Society,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith [New York: International Publishers, 1971], p. 263).

communist party, too, this ideology ‘interpellates individuals into subjects,’ precisely into *militant* subjects . . .” (SR, 263; original emphasis). But, if so, where does the difference between the bourgeois party and the proletarian party consist? If he does not explain this difference properly, Althusser cannot help but admitting the fault of making the idea of a revolutionary party impossible.

Vis-à-vis this issue, Althusser sets forth the following argument: that the revolutionary party, though it is certainly constituted on the basis of an ideology, nevertheless fundamentally differs from a bourgeois party in that it possesses “not only [spontaneous] experiences (of class struggles it has led for more than a century) but *objective knowledge* whose principles Marxism provides it with” (SR, 264; original emphasis). Does not this, however, amount to saying that, unlike the bourgeois party totally defined by its ideology, the revolutionary party has both its ideology and its (relative) truth, always moving in the direction of ridding itself of the former? To see that such a teleological compromise is highly problematic, it suffices to remind oneself that what returns to Althusser’s conception of ideology is the very epistemological opposition between the true and the false that he himself problematized in the past by considering ideology as a *social relation*. This return of the epistemological opposition only indicates that Althusser is here cornered by his critics, or by the ideological mirror game that they imposed upon him, to think the issue in terms of an external relationship between the bourgeois and the proletarian ideology.

One must ask, however: Even if this is the direction in which Althusser was forced to move, is it really the only possible way to understand the Althusserian notion of

ideological struggle? Does not the rational kernel of Althusser's argument rather lie in the idea that the dominant ideology is ceaselessly compelled to struggle to achieve its ideological unity, at least in appearance, by suppressing or displacing from the scene conflicts and resistances that arise from its relationship with the dominated masses themselves? In 1982, just four years after the debate, Balibar proposes the following solution to Althusser's predicament concerning the issue of the relation between the party and the state:

But, at the same time, while maintaining that only the ideology of the dominant can be organized into a complete system—which makes it difficult to talk about “a dominated ideology” isolatable as such—, he [Althusser] tends to pose that, in the permanent “ideological class struggle,” the determinant element in the last instance is paradoxically the position occupied *in* the ideological by the exploited and *dominated class*. This means that no state apparatus can exist without a “popular base” rooted in the conditions of labor and of existence, and therefore without “exploiting” in its way the progressive and materialist element that the ideology of the dominated class contains. One can now explain why, whereas Gramsci designates in the revolutionary party a “modern prince” such that its action in the middle of the masses leads to “making itself the state,” Althusser insists contradictorily both on the impossibility for the revolutionary party to extract itself entirely from the determination of the “political ISA” (of which it itself also constitutes an element) and on the necessity to constitute a “party outside the State” in the perspective of communism that workers' struggles already prepares.

Mais en même temps, tout en maintenant que seule l'idéologie de la classe dominante peut être organisée en un système complet—ce qui rend difficile de parler d'une « idéologie dominée » isolable comme telle—, il [Althusser] tend à poser que, dans la « lutte de classe idéologique » permanente, l'élément déterminant en dernière instance est paradoxalement la position occupée dans l'idéologique par les classes dominées et exploitées. Ce qui veut dire qu'aucune idéologie d'Etat ne peut exister sans une « base populaire » enracinée dans les conditions de travail et d'existence, et donc sans « exploiter » à sa façon l'élément progressiste et matérialiste que comporte l'idéologie des classes dominées. On peut dès lors s'expliquer pourquoi, alors que Gramsci désigne dans le parti révolutionnaire un « prince nouveau » que son action au sein des masses conduit à se « faire Etat » lui-même, Althusser, lui, insiste contradictoirement et sur l'impossibilité pour le parti révolutionnaire de s'arracher entièrement à la détermination de l'« AIE politique »

*(dont il constitue lui aussi un élément), et sur la nécessité de constituer un « parti hors Etat » dans la perspective du communisme, qu'ébauchent déjà les luttes ouvrières.*²¹

Here, Balibar not only conceives of the relationship between the dominant and the dominated ideology in an extremely *immanent* way but goes so far as to invert the usual hierarchical relation between the two. What is determinant in the last instance in the constitution of the dominant ideology is not the ideology of the dominant class but conversely that of the dominated class. For the dominant ideology cannot simply exclude the ideology of the dominated but must use it and reflect it into its own constitution precisely in order to become *dominant* in the strong sense of the term, that is to say, in order to be *broadly received by the dominated themselves as legitimate*.

By developing such a perspective, Balibar in his 1988 essay, "The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser," proposes the following thesis: "Contrary to the common assumption of most sociological theories of legitimacy and hegemony, it [the dominant ideology] cannot be primarily the 'lived' experience of the rulers, but only the 'lived' experience of the dominated masses, which—as Marx said of religion—involves at the same time *an acceptance or recognition and a protest or revolt against the existing 'world.'*"²² The notions that the dominant ideology elaborates are "Justice, Liberty and

²¹ Balibar, "Hégémonie ou « AIE », dans G. Bensussan et G. Labica (éds.), *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme* (Paris: PUF, 1982), pp. 54 (original emphasis).

²² Balibar, "The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser," p. 12. However, let us immediately note that this is also what Althusser literally said in his essay on "The 'Piccolo Teatro'": "[T]his unity [of ideology] is as much *a desired or rejected unity* as an achieved unity. In other words, in the theatrical world, as in the aesthetic world more generally, ideology is always in essence *the site of a competition and a struggle*" (*FM*, 149; emphasis added). No wonder Balibar referred to this piece of Althusser's to offer the evidence of his engagement with the question of resistance and revolt, as we quoted in one of the epigraphs to this chapter.

Equality, Effort and Happiness, etc.”; but such notions do not exclusively belong to the imaginary of the dominant class but to that of individuals in general, “individuals who live the masses’ or the people’s conditions.”²³ This novel way of conceptualizing the dominant ideology, indeed, produces what might be called an “epistemological break”; it takes an irreversible step beyond what the Marxist conception of ideology, as if spell-bound, never stopped repeating, since Marx said in *German Ideology*: the dominant ideology is the ideology of the dominant class.²⁴

From this point of view, Balibar attempts to reformulate the question of ideological revolt. Just as dead capital is made of living labor, the dominant ideological apparatus (the state or the Church) ceaselessly requires the “popular religious, moral, legal and aesthetic imaginary of the masses as their specific fuel.”²⁵ The ideological dominance, for this reason, includes in itself a latent contradiction. Once the structural antagonism is revealed before their own eyes through certain overdetermined effects of a number of practices and events, the dominated masses carry out a collective act of revolt by taking seriously the universality of their own imaginary, which has been returned to them “from above,” and demanding their immediate full inclusion in it—an inclusion which would realize, in their imagination, the *ideal* that Balibar somewhere else calls “equaliberty”

²³ Balibar, “The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser,” p. 13.

²⁴ As Balibar himself notes, it is rather Friedrich Nietzsche who, albeit with cynicism, made a penetrating observation that the ruling idea of the modern world is “slaves’ morals.”

²⁵ Ibid.

(*aequa libertas*).²⁶ When such an ideological revolt encounters the fundamental economic contradiction which is itself non-contemporaneous with the ideological contradiction, Balibar argues, a revolution breaks out (whether successful or not).

We have already indicated above that the charges brought against Althusser in the name of functionalism are seriously mistaken; there is just too much textual evidence demonstrating otherwise. His posthumously published book-length manuscript, *Sur la reproduction*, for instance, is full of discussions of ideological revolt. We can even learn from this manuscript that Althusser originally planned two volumes on ideology and wanted to devote the second volume entirely to the topic of ideological class struggle (though he could not realize this plan probably in part owing to his health problem). This was not a text he additionally wrote after he was criticized, but, on the contrary, the original text from which the very criticized essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” was extracted. Making a distinction between the dominant ideology and the dominated ideology, Althusser writes:

It is necessary to distinguish between the determined elements of the ideology of the State, which are realized and exist in a determined Apparatus and its practices, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ideology that is “produced,” in the middle of this Apparatus, by its practices. In order to mark this distinction in language, we call the first ideology the Primary Ideology, and the second by-product of the practice in which the Primary Ideology is realized, the secondary, subordinate ideology. / Let us note again an important point. As for this secondary ideology, we say that it is “produced” by the practice of the apparatus that realizes the Primary Ideology. This is because *any practice in the world does not produce “its” ideology all by itself*.

²⁶ For example, see Balibar, “‘Rights of Man’ and ‘Rights of the Citizen’: The Modern Dialectic of Equality and Freedom,” *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 47; Balibar, “Three Concepts of Politics: Emancipation, Transformation, Civility,” *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. C. Jones, J. Swenson, & C. Turner (London: Verso, 2002), p. 3.

There is no “spontaneous” ideology, though it can be useful to employ such an expression as “spontaneous” ideology for the convenience of expression and for the purpose of demonstrating a limited point. In our case, these secondary ideologies are produced by a conjunction of complex causes, in which appears, on the side of the practice in question, the effect of other exterior ideology, of other exterior practices—and in the last instance, however dissimulated they are, the distant, yet in reality very near, effects themselves of *class struggles*. No one can dare to deny this if one only heeds a bit of attention to what has been happening for some time now in the ideology of certain religious milieu, in the milieu of “school” (in May [1968] and since then) and in Families (since May). (*SR*, 114-15; original emphasis)

There are two simultaneous points that he is trying to make in this passage. First, he wants to confirm that, in the theory of ideology, there is indeed room for a potential ideological nonconformity to the dominant ideology (or “the Primary Ideology,” as he calls it). But this ideological deviation or swerve is realized, *not* in the form of the subject’s escape from ideology as a whole, but in the form of the “secondary ideology” defined as an unintended by-product of the ISAs’ practices. The secondary ideology in this sense is produced (or “by-produced”) under the influence of intervening external causes including class struggle. Secondly, however, Althusser does not simply want to say that such a secondary ideology is “spontaneously” produced without the material support of an ideological apparatus, as if sporadic practices of the dominated masses alone (without the revolutionary party, one might add) could somehow generate a relatively unified ideology of their own, suitable for a resistance to the class domination of the bourgeoisie. He maintains that every ideological production requires an apparatus, and that, since every apparatus in the strong sense exists only as a *state* apparatus, the place for the production of the secondary ideology must also be sought in the middle of the ISAs themselves. The secondary ideology, therefore, is produced in the ISAs just as

the primary or dominant ideology is; but it is produced there not as a function but as a *malfunction* caused by the foreign materials and fuels that the ISAs themselves must integrate and consume *in order to function*.²⁷ This necessary malfunction of the ISAs is what, Althusser claims, eventually gives rise to an ideological revolt of the dominated masses. He contends: “And if one would like to object that the aforementioned subject can act otherwise [other than the way ideology commands], let us recall that we said that the ritual practice in which a ‘primary’ ideology is realized can ‘produce’ (that is, by-produce) a ‘secondary’ ideology—thank God, without this, there would be neither the revolt nor the revolutionary ‘awakening of consciousness [*prise de conscience*],’ no revolution would be possible” (SR, 222).

How are we, then, to explain the ideological tenacity of the criticism accusing Althusser of functionalism? If this criticism never stops haunting him, this is, of course, not without a reason; in the end, we can admit that he failed to cross a crucial threshold in understanding the internal logic of the masses’ insurrection. This failure, however, did not result from his blind belief in some crude version of structuralism, which is simply content to oppose the subject and the structure and then ignore the dimension of the former by stressing the absolute necessity of the latter (does the criticism itself, however, escape from such a crude structuralism by simply wanting to stress the other pole of the same opposition, namely the subject?). Althusser’s failure rather resulted from his

²⁷ One of the things that Althusser has in mind is the historical phenomenon that institutions such as a proletarian party or a labor union appear in the system of a bourgeois ISA. He argues that this is not due to the “logic” of the system of the corresponding ISA, but due to a long class struggle which forces the legal recognition of such institutions and their inscriptions in the system (SR, 126). The ISAs, whose goal is, above all, to create a unity of society, are repeatedly forced to find ways to unify heterogeneous demands arising from diverse social antagonisms.

inability to overcome the old “epistemological obstacle” of classical Marxism itself which views the dominant ideology simply as the ideology of the dominant class. In his “Note on the ISAs,” too, Althusser repeats this tautological conception of the dominant ideology while he is being driven by it into the middle of unresolvable contradictions. If Balibar finally moves out of the range of any accusation of functionalism, it is precisely because, while making no reference to the mystifying notion of subjectivity, he still managed to find a convincing explanation for the internal mechanism of ideological revolt by eliminating the aforementioned epistemological obstacle.

Balibar’s epistemological break brings about significant theoretical consequences. As the state and its dominant ideology are understood not simply as the dominant class’s but, in the last instance, as the dominated masses’ own, many things that have largely been ignored by Marxism as bourgeois deceptions now receive a new analysis. In particular, the rights of citizens (or citizenship), which have been treated as simple illusions by Marx, become one of the central objects of theoretical reflection. In the 1990s, Balibar reconstructs his theoretical frame by distinguishing between “ideal universality” (as the moment of insurrection inscribed in the dominant ideology) and “fictive universality” (which is instituted by the dominant ideological state apparatus itself).

Let us briefly go over what these two categories imply and how they are related to each other. Fictive universality is a category introduced to explain the hegemonic function of the dominant ideology. The term “fictive” here does not mean “deceptive” or “illusory,” but rather indicates that such universality, while being imaginary, produces

material effects in reality, and therefore should be treated as effective as other realities (for example, economic one). It indicates, in other words, that ideology is effective in the sense of the German term “*wirklich*”: it is a social *activity* realized through material institutions rather than an idea or a mental representation that the subject forms in its mind with regard to the external world. Of course, this does not imply that all imaginaries are effective to an equal degree, since, to be sure, some of them are more effective than others. The important question is: how can the imaginary of the dominant ideology or its dominant identity produce its *hegemonic effect* over other imaginaries or identities?

According to Balibar, universality as fiction has historically been realized in the West in the two mutually antithetical forms: the religious form of the Catholic Church and the political form of the nation state. These two forms are mutually antithetical inasmuch as each of them seeks its “point of honor” in offering an effective solution to the chronic problem that the other suffers from. Whereas the Church takes honor for resolving ethnic conflicts preoccupying the nation state, the nation state conversely takes honor for keeping peace among different religions or religious groups whose existence persistently troubles the Church. Both of these hegemonic institutions, however, accomplish their goals not by establishing their own ideologies as “totalitarian ideologies” but rather as what Balibar calls “total ideologies,” namely, ideologies that do not aim at a sheer repression or exclusion of particular identities, but rather at an inaugural of a political space in which those particular identities are somewhat relativized and thus find civil ways to coexist with one another; they achieve this effect of a politics of civility by reconstructing the particular identities (or identity groups) into so many *mediations* of the

superior legitimacy that they themselves want to represent. The nation state presents itself as the universal agent transcending all religious groups, in such a way that it permits them to practice certain religious freedom on condition that they all follow the same state law and tolerate one another accordingly. Likewise, the Catholic Church acquires its supreme legitimacy over diverse ethnic groups by declaring itself not to belong to one “elected” nation but, instead, to all nations, and proffering itself as something universal in which all particular nations can participate and practice to one another Christ’s fundamental lesson: “Love thy neighbor.” In short, total ideology is profoundly *pluralistic*.

Such hegemonic power of total ideology originates from the fact that it discovers an effective institutional form of recognizing individuals in a transindividual way by avoiding the two extremes of (atomistic) individualism and (totalitarian) organicism. It “liberates” individuals by relatively separating them from their *primary belongings* such as families, races, religions, regions, occupations, etc., and permitting them to enter their *secondary belongings* (such as the Church or the nation state).²⁸ Indeed, this is what is commonly accepted as the meaning of becoming citizens. Individuals do not have to completely abandon their primary identities in order to become citizens; but, by becoming citizens, they can access the political and cultural space in which they can “play” with their primary identities and others’ while abiding by certain rules. Hence, the hegemonic power that a total institution holds over particular belongings is generated

²⁸ As for a more detailed account of primary and secondary identities or belongings, see Babliar, “*Homo Nationalis: An Anthropological Sketch of the Nation-From, We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*,” trans. James Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), especially pp. 25-30.

through an explosive encounter between the institution's desire for power, desire to establish itself as the supreme authority from above, and, from below, numerous individuals' aspiration to acquire freedom and independence from their primary belongings (for instance, we hardly find adolescents who do not dream about becoming independent from their parents or guardians).

As Balibar often mentions, it is Hegel (especially, the Hegel of *Philosophy of Right*) who best understood this mechanism of the production of total ideology's hegemonic power. In his *On the Jewish Question*, Marx in his own way recognizes such an essential contribution of Hegel's philosophy and writes:

. . . The state abolishes distinctions of *birth, rank, education*, and *occupation* in its fashion when it declares them to be *non-political* distinctions, when it proclaims that every member of the community *equally* participates in popular sovereignty without regard to these distinctions, and when it deals with all elements of the actual life of the nation from the standpoint of the state. Nevertheless the state permits private property, education, and occupation to *act* and manifest their *particular* nature as private property, education, and occupation in their *own ways*. Far from overcoming these *factual* distinctions, the state exists only by presupposing them; it is aware of itself as a *political state* and makes its *universality* effective only in opposition to these elements. *Hegel*, therefore, defines the relation of the *political state* to religion quite correctly in saying: "If the state is to have specific existence as the *self-knowing ethical actuality* of Spirit, it must be *distinct* from the form of authority and faith; this distinction emerges only as the ecclesiastical sphere is *divided* within itself; *only* thus has the state attained *universality* of thought, the principle of its form, *above particular* churches and only thus does it bring that universality into existence." (Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*, 1st ed., p. 346 [§ 270].) Exactly! Only thus *above the particular* elements is the state a universality.²⁹

Of course, fictive universality in this sense is not a limitless universality, just as the pluralism that it pursues is not an unbound pluralism. The dominant ideology obliges

²⁹ Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in Lawrence H. Simon (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), p. 8 (original emphasis).

individuals to pay the price for their own “liberations” by accepting the criteria of normality or normal subjectivity corresponding to the secondary identity (a citizen or a believer) that it institutes. Hence, to be recognized as a “free” individual, one must be mentally sane, conform to the reputable models of reasoning and behavior, and follow (or pretend to follow) the prevailing norms of sexual decency and heterosexuality. Not only does the state constantly teach such norms through its educational and disciplinary facilities but it tries to impose them as an overwhelming reality by exhibiting how they are in use in “normal” people’s everyday life, especially, through cultural apparatuses such as TV shows, dramas, movies, and so on.

Can this control over individuals go on indefinitely without difficulties? Balibar argues that this control remains effective only if the “ensemble of beliefs and of rules of behavior is maintained in time, that is, over generations, at least for the ‘majority,’ and, therefore, on the opposite side of social divisions, whether they are divisions of classes or others.”³⁰ Hence, when this condition is dissatisfied due to a certain emergence of unexpected factors (economic as well as ideological), the dominant ideology loses its controlling power and faces a crisis. Balibar in this way reinstates Althusser’s original idea that the dominant ideological state apparatuses, while they are forced to keep on trying, can never produce its final unity out of the heterogeneous forms and elements that they have to consume.

It is undoubtedly from this inability that the possibility of ideological revolt arises. Yet, Balibar holds that, in order to bring this possibility into a full scale insurrection, it is

³⁰ Balibar, “Les Universels,” *La Crainte des masses*, p. 434.

not enough to have subversive movements of “deviant” individuals and groups fighting against the dominant cultural norms. For the presence of such movements of minority groups are just what are easily expected of the hegemonic production of normality itself. Could the phenomenon of mass insurrection, then, be accounted for in terms of class struggle *qua* the radical antagonism of the society? Unfortunately, as Marxists’ past experiences of economism and unionism eloquently show, workers’ class struggles regularly fail to overcome their particular interests and identities, falling short of the level of a truly emancipatory movement for all. Balibar maintains that it is neither one nor the other, but precisely *their combination* taking place “when it appears to be impossible [for the majority] to demand individuality and its right without colliding with the rules of normality and putting them into question.”³¹ Only through this combination, the multitudes of the society do not stop at simple acts of resistance but engage themselves in a genuinely insurrectional movement toward *ideal universality*.

This does not mean, however, that, once it gives way to ideal universality, fictive universality simply remains something that permanently belongs to the past. As long as ideal universality works as a purely negative principle, it cannot help but eventually hide itself in another version of fictive universality that it itself brings into being after destroying the old one. Can there be yet another version of fictive universality distinct from both that of universal religion and that of nation state? If so, what differences should it have and in what aspects can it be better than old ones? Is there an alternative way to articulate the politics of civility with that of emancipation? We will explore these issues

³¹ Balibar, “Les Universels,” p. 441.

in the next section by comparing Lacan's and Althusser's attempts to theorize a politics of civility.

Which Politics of Civility?

One of Althusser's essential criticisms of Lacan is directed at the latter's teleological idea that, once the reign of the symbolic law is established beyond the ambivalent effects of the imaginary, various kinds of social antagonisms can be brought under control in a necessary manner. From my point of view, this criticism of Lacan is hardly disputable; and, as we saw in chapter 2, it was actually accepted by Lacan himself in his own way during the later period of his life. What does not look clear to me, however, is whether such a criticism produces only a theoretically positive effect. For it seems that, whether intended or not, it can also generate a certain blind spot for us by bracketing an entire issue that Lacan for his own part regarded as essential: namely, the issue of violence. This is the question that Balibar himself raises in his recent book, *Violence et civilité* (2010), though his focus is on Hegel rather than on Lacan:

Althusser used to say that there can be no such thing as "Hegelian politics," a thesis that is immediately inscribed for him in the frame of a Machiavellian conception of politics as the reign of uncertainty, of conflict between action and fortune, which excludes the kind of necessity or, better, of predetermination that forms the "spiritual" horizon of the Hegelian teleology. Let us remark that, in Althusser (and *a fortiori* in other Marxists), the price of the non-teleological conception of politics is a neutralization, at least in appearance, of the problem of the relations between violence and politics, a neutralization that does not exist in Hegel (or not to the same degree): if not in the representation of exploitation and of its state [*étatiques*] conditions of "reproduction," then at least in the definition of class struggle, and by consequence of political action.³²

Of course, this does not mean that one should cancel or, at least, relativize

³² Balibar, *Violence et civilité* (Paris: Galilée, 2010), p. 55.

Althusser's critique of teleology itself; it rather means that one must be able to find a way to discuss the issue of violence while refraining from making such teleological assumptions. This is actually what Balibar does in his own text in an admirable way. However, as far as I am concerned, I would like to pursue another path and examine two things: first, whether Lacan's category of the "name of the father" can be interpreted as a theoretical attempt to formulate a politics of civility aiming to reduce extreme violence; and, secondly, whether there is in Althusser himself an alternative formulation of such a politics of civility, which perhaps suits better his "Machiavellian conception of politics," but does not necessarily neutralize the issue of violence.

As far as the Sainte-Anne hospital is concerned, Lacan offered his last seminar in 1963 under the title, "Des Noms-du-Père." This seminar, which would have become his eleventh seminar under normal circumstances, was not included in the official series because it was interrupted by the incident of Lacan's expulsion from the *Société Française de Psychanalyse* as well as from the Sainte-Anne hospital itself. The first session, which was in fact the only session given for this lost seminar, however, contains an extraordinary discussion of "the name of the father," especially its function as is revealed by the case of Abraham's sacrifice. Lacan discusses Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's famous paintings entitled "The Sacrifice of Isaac." Though there are two known versions, one from 1596 and the other from 1602-03, Lacan focuses on the later version, which seems to depict the episode with much more intensity. In this version, there is depicted the boy, Isaac, whose suffering and grimacing face is forcibly pushed down against the small altar made of stone. Abraham is holding a knife right above the

boy's neck, while his face is turned aside toward the angel who is there to disclose God's message not to sacrifice the boy.

Lacan's whole interpretation develops from his penetrating observation that Abraham's decision to follow God's initial commandment to sacrifice his son, despite the usual reading given to it,³³ was in fact not an extraordinary act at all. "[W]e can remember," argues Lacan, "that to sacrifice one's little boy to the local *Elohim* [god] was customary; it was so not only at that time, because this [custom] continued until very late, so that the angel of the Name [i.e., *El Shaddai* or God] or the prophet who speaks in the name of the Name constantly had to stop the Israelites on the way of recommencing it [*nous pourrions nous souvenir que sacrifier son petit garçon à l'Élohim du coin, c'était courant, et non pas seulement à l'époque, car ça a continué si tard qu'il a fallu sans cesse que l'ange du Nom ou le prophète qui parle au nom du Nom arrêtaient les Israélites sur la voie de recommencer*]" (DNP, 96).

Hence, Abraham's greatness, as Lacan sees it, does not arise from the fact that he heroically decided to leave the worldly understanding and follow what his faith commanded him, even if this meant that he had to kill his own beloved son. Of course, Lacan acknowledges that Abraham was quite "obsessed" with his son. Though he already had another son named Ismael, Abraham acquired him only by sleeping with a slave woman; Isaac was the only legitimate son he had. Furthermore, Lacan argues that it was quite certain that his wife, Sarah, was not going to give birth to another child, due to the

³³ The reading that Lacan put into question here (DNP, pp. 93-95) is Søren Kierkegaard's. See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

menopause that she was experiencing. However, the worldly understanding at that time did not say that, in such a case, one should be allowed to keep his boy, but, instead, that one still should be able to go to the mountain and sacrifice him to the *Elohim* that everyone in the region worshiped.

Where, then, does Lacan think Abraham's greatness lies? Referring to a little book from the end of the eleventh century, written by a certain author named Rachi, otherwise known as Rabbi Salomon ben Isaac, de Troyes, Lacan points out that there were neither one nor two, but three fathers involved in this biblical story. First, obviously, there was Isaac's real father, Abraham, but there was also the angel who interrupted him and revealed God's true intention not to sacrifice Isaac. Although this angel himself was not a father, he nevertheless represented another father, *El Shaddai*. *El Shaddai*, according to Lacan, was also an *Elohim*, a god, whose Name, nonetheless, was considered unpronounceable unlike other gods' names, because he was the same God as Moses', who identified himself in the bible by saying that "*Ehyeh acher ehyeh*" or "I am that I am." In addition to this, Lacan says: "[the Greek] did not translate *El Shaddai*, as our days, by the *Tout-Puissant*, the Almighty; prudently, they did not translate it by *Theosis*, the name that they give to all the gods whose names they do not translate by Lord or *Kyrios*, which is reserved for *Shem*, that is, for the Name that I am not pronouncing" (DNP, 93). In short, *El Shaddai* is the Judaic God who was not deemed almighty. This non-omnipotent God is the one who is put to the position of the symbolic father in Lacan's construal.

What about the third father, then? Following Rachi's accounts, and also returning to

Caravaggio's aforementioned paintings, Lacan points out that, besides the boy and the two fathers, there is apparently another being present next to the altar, namely, the ram with its horns caught somewhere inside the fence. This ram, according to Lacan, also represents an *Elohim*. He argues:

Rachi is the best shortcut to express that, according to the rabbinic tradition, the ram in question is the primordial Ram. It has been there, writes he, since the seven days of the Creation, and this designates it for what it is, an *Elohim*. In effect, what was there is not just the one whose name is unpronounceable, but all the *Elohim*'s. The Ram is traditionally recognized as the ancestor of the Semite race, the one which joins Abraham to the origins, moreover, in a sufficiently short term. (*DNP*, 100)

As is well known, this is the very ram that Abraham in the end sacrificed instead of his son. But, according to Lacan, this ram was not just an animal that Abraham conveniently found there or that God prepared for him in case he still wanted to sacrifice something; rather, it was the *Elohim*, the local god, who was there to receive and "enjoy" the sacrificial offering made by Abraham. "This ram is his eponymous ancestor, the God of his race," says Lacan (*DNP*, 100). Thus, Lacan puts the ram into the position of the "primordial father of the horde" (Freud), namely, the imaginary father who, being almighty and all possessing, never allows other men (especially, his sons) to sexually approach women belonging to his horde.

Now, Lacan argues that Abraham's true greatness lies in his successful act of cutting the phantasmatic link, with the knife in his hand, between the primordial Ram-God and the other God, *El Shaddai*, or between the imaginary father and the symbolic father, whose disparity Lacan defines in terms of the difference between *jouissance* and desire. Since he is the one who enjoys, and tries to keep all enjoyment to himself, the imaginary

father appears to be the one who oversees the subject all the time and tries to deprive it of any chance to access enjoyment (*jouissance*). In this sense, he is the father of “privation”—not of “castration.” Lacan made this important distinction in *Seminar VII* (*Se VII*, 307-08). He designated the imaginary father as the “origin of the superego,” whose sole function, of course, is to divest the subject of enjoyment. Lacan, on the other hand, considered the real father to be “the castrating father”; he argued that it is through the castrating father that the Oedipus complex finally finds its own resolution, and that the symbolic father is established as the one who, in contrast to the imaginary father, knows how to “turn a blind eye to desire” (*EC*, 698). Of course, the symbolic father is still understood as a *desiring* father. But he is the father who *both* desires *and* lets others desire within the limit of his universal law. It is by abiding by such a universal law that all desires overcome their regressive tendencies toward a variety of pathological enjoyments.

What we realize anew in the context of the seminar, *Des Noms-du-Père*, however, is the fact that Lacan’s whole problematic of “the name of the father” does not simply address issues concerning the individual level. It addresses the issue of *violence of community*. Lacan argues:

Here the blade of the knife makes its mark between the *jouissance* of God and what, in this tradition, is presented as his desire. The thing that should be provoked to fall is *the biological origin*. This is the key to the mystery there, in which is read the aversion of the Judaic tradition with regard to what exists everywhere else. The Hebraic hates the practice of *metaphysico-sexual rites that, in a feast, unites the community to the jouissance of God*. The Hebraic, on the contrary, values the gap separating desire from *jouissance*. / One finds the symbol of this gap in this same context, that of the relation of *El Shaddai* to Abraham. It is there where, primordially, is born the law of circumcision, which gives this little piece of flesh

cut as *the sign of the alliance of the people with the desire of the one who elected them.*

Ici se marque le tranchant du couteau entre la jouissance de Dieu et ce qui, dans cette tradition, se présentifie comme son désir. Ce don't il s'agit de provoquer la chute, c'est l'origine biologique. C'est là la clé du mystère, où se lit l'aversion de la tradition judaïque à l'égard de ce qui existe partout ailleurs. L'hébreïque hait la pratique des rites métaphysico-sexuels qui, dans la fête, unissent la communauté à la jouissance de Dieu. Il met tout au contraire en valeur la béance séparant le désir de la jouissance. / Le symbole de cette béance, on le trouve dans ce même contexte, celui de la relation d'El Shaddaï à Abraham. C'est là où, primordialement, naît la loi de la circoncision, qui donne comme signe de l'alliance du peuple avec le désir de celui qui l'a élu ce petit morceau de chair tranché. (DNP, 100-01; emphasis added)

Here Lacan distinguishes two kinds of identities: the imaginary identity linked to the “biological origin” of the community and the symbolic identity, which is also communal but can only be established through a break from such an origin. The imaginary identity unites members of the community to the racial God (the Ram), who seduces them to become instruments of his *jouissance*, to offer some of their “neighbors” as sacrifices to him, and thus to constantly recover a monolithic community in which there are no individuals but only a collectivity. The symbolic identity, on the other hand, creates a political “gap,” as Lacan calls it, between the community and its individual members, by setting up the symbolic law of sacrifice (the law of circumcision), in the name of which everyone gives up a certain amount of his or her *jouissance* and thus joins the *desiring* community, which desires precisely because its demand to *jouissance* is never fully satisfied. The Lacanian politics clearly aims at reducing extreme violence by making a transition from a “metaphysico-sexual” community based on an imaginary identity to a community based on a symbolic identity.

Can we not say, then, that this Lacanian politics corresponds in essentials to what Balibar calls a politics of civility, namely, a politics through which subjects separate themselves from their primary or “natural” identities in order to acquire their secondary identities as citizens? In fact, the whole construction of the upper level of the Lacanian graph of desire that we discussed in previous chapters can be reinterpreted as a theoretical attempt to account for the possibility of such a political practice. Lacan’s formula of the paternal metaphor, in particular, can be seen as describing the ethico-political effect of the substitution of one identity for another, of the secondary identity for the primary identity, and, therefore, of the *civil* identity for the *natural* identity. The power established through the process of the formation of the paternal metaphor is not a despotic power but a hegemonic power, insofar as it knows how to turn a blind eye to diverse desires of individual members of the community. It *individualizes individuals* on condition that they all give up the Sadean rights to *jouissance*, which, as we discussed in chapter 2, must be distinguishable from the Kantian rights to *pure desire*.³⁴

³⁴ Hence, Lacan’s objection to Freud’s account of totem (in *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989]) concerns the fact that, in Freud’s understanding, the symbolic father is established as an effect of the sons’ collective revolt against the primordial father; in this case, apparently, no act of castration is necessary. Lacan privileges Abraham’s case because the effect is achieved through the intervention of the real father as the agent of castration. In this regard, it is significant that Lacan concludes his “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire” as follows: “Castration means that *jouissance* has to be refused in order to be attained on the *inverse scale* of the Law of desire” (*EC*, 700; emphasis added). Alan Sheridan, the translator of *Écrits: A Selection*, more agreeably renders the same sentence as follows: “Castration means that *jouissance* must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder (*l’échelle renversée*) of the Law of desire” (Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977], p. 324). In other words, *jouissance*, according to Lacan, must be reached *from above* through the law of *desire*. From this perspective, Žižek’s acclaim for the Benjaminian idea of divine violence *qua* the “law-destroying” violence appears to be far from Lacan’s own doctrine concerning violence. It rather seems to approach the model of *Totem and Taboo*. See Žižek’s concluding chapter of *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008). It is possible to imagine that Lacan would share a similar worry with Jacques Derrida. Benjamin famously distinguishes mythical violence and divine violence by defining the former as the kind of violence that only kills to threaten, and the latter as

What Althusser questions in this Lacanian conception of politics, of course, is its teleological belief that social conflicts can be resolved effectively and necessarily in such a process of the formation of the paternal metaphor. It is this belief that Althusser put into question when he criticized Lacan's thesis concerning the letter: namely, that "a letter always arrives at its destination." Is this the end of the debate, however? It certainly appears so, if we only consider Althusser's texts published during his lifetime. But, if we consider the other texts, especially his posthumously published texts on Machiavelli, we discover, to our surprise, that Althusser himself was unwittingly drawn near such a theoretical motif of Lacan's. The most interesting thing is the fact that this theoretical convergence took place in the texts in which he apparently maximized his critique of teleology by formulating what he called the "materialism of encounter" or the "aleatory materialism."

In his concluding chapter of *Machiavelli and Us*, Althusser centers on the idea of "fear without hatred." Discussing Machiavelli's maxim, "it is better to be feared than to be loved," which appears in chapter XVII of *The Prince*, Althusser combines two questions in the figure of the popular prince: the question of fear and that of class antagonism. He argues:

the kind that does not intend to threaten but annihilate (Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz [New York: Schocken Books, 1978], p. 297). However, the violence that does not threaten but purely annihilates not only risks a nihilism concerning institutions in general but also comes too close to the definition of extreme violence. This is why, I think, Jacques Derrida expressed his reservations with respect to the Benjaminian idea of divine violence. See Derrida, "Force of the Law," trans. Mary Quaintance, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 228-98 (especially, its "Post-Scriptum"). Perhaps, what Benjamin misses in his entire classification of violence is the Machiavellian dimension of "fear without hatred," as Althusser calls it, namely, the dimension of the violence that threatens but, at least in principle, does not entail hatred. This violence is surely a "law-founding" violence, but it does not necessarily aim at absolutizing the law, as we shall see from now on.

This formula—fear without hatred—might seem harsh for the people of a popular Prince. But to give it its precise meaning, it must be developed. That the Prince must at all costs avoid being hated by his people obviously signifies that he must beware of alienating the people as the greatest peril. But there is more: hatred in Machiavelli has a precise connotation. Above all, it is the people's hatred of the *nobles*. In connection with the kingdom of France, for instance, we are told that Louis IX 'was well aware of the ambition and arrogance of the nobles. . . . On the other hand, . . . he knew that the people hated the nobles.' The founder of the kingdom therefore established the *parlement* 'to restrain the nobles and favour the people.' *Hatred thus possesses a class signification*. In the formula 'fear without hatred', the phrase 'without hatred' signifies that the Prince demarcates himself from the nobles and sides with the people against them. (MU, 100-01; emphasis added)

Hence, the prince can avoid people's hatred insofar as he forms a class alliance with people against the nobles through the very fear that he provokes in everyone. Althusser is not saying that the prince should be loved by people for what he does to the nobles. In effect, people's love toward the prince is considered dangerous, for love easily turns into hatred. Everything here depends on conjuncture, or on *fortuna*, as Machiavelli calls it. The more one is loved, the better chance to be hated one has in the future, when Fortune changes her mind. In order to avoid such a hazardous effect of love, there must be maintained a distance, or, according to Althusser's preferred expression, "an emptiness of the distance taken," between the prince and his people, because such a distance is, in fact, what can be said to constitute the essence of the prince's *virtù* or ability to cope with unpredictable changes of the fortune (or, what is the same, of the people's mind). Henceforth, what is required is not people's love but their *friendship* (accompanied and controlled by fear). The conquest of such a strange friendship is the political objective that Machiavelli lays stress on throughout his text, *The Prince*. Althusser continues:

But there is still more: fear without hatred closes down one space and opens up another, specific space, the minimal political base from which the people's

friendship—an expression Machiavelli prefers to the people's love—becomes the decisive political objective. In effect, what is ruled out is the people's undiluted love, without coercion, since it is precarious and capricious. What is aimed at instead is the people's friendship, 'popular goodwill' on the basis of state coercion. Machiavelli constantly returns to this theme, which gives explicit expression to his own position. (*MU*, 101)

How exactly can the prince inaugurate such a strange friendship with his people? In order to find an answer to this question, it is better to consult another text written by Althusser, which was only recently published as an appendix to the second French edition of his autobiography, *L'Avenir dure longtemps*. Under the title, "Fragments de *L'Avenir dure longtemps*," there are collected three essays, among which we find a text entitled "Machiavel." To contrast "fear-friendship" to "love-hatred," Althusser there focuses on the singular case of Cesare Borgia's handling of his lieutenant Remirro that Machiavelli presents in chapter VII of *The Prince*.³⁵ Let us read Machiavelli's own account of the episode in question:

Once the duke [Cesare] had taken over Romagna, he found it had been commanded by impotent lords who had been readier to despoil their subjects than to correct them, and had given their subjects matter for disunion, not for union, Since that province was quite full of robberies, quarrels, and every other kind of insolence, he judged it necessary to give it good government, if he wanted to reduce it to peace and obedience to a kingly arm. So he put there Messer Remirro de Orco, a cruel and ready man, to whom he gave the fullest power. In a short time Remirro reduced it to peace and unity, with the very greatest reputation for himself. Then the duke judged that such excessive authority was not necessary, because he feared that it might become hateful; and he set up a civil court in the middle of the province, with a most excellent president, where each city had its advocate. And because he knew that past rigors had generated some hatred for Remirro, to purge the spirits of that people and to gain them entirely to himself, he wished to show that if any cruelty had been committed, this had not come from him but from the harsh nature of his minister. And having seized this opportunity, he had him placed one morning in the piazza at

³⁵ Of course, this is not Caesar, the Roman emperor, but the Duke of Valentinois, Pope Alexander VI's son, whom Machiavelli accompanied for a while as a diplomat from the Florentine Republic.

Cesena in two pieces, with a piece of wood and a bloody knife beside him. The ferocity of this spectacle left the people *at once satisfied and stupefied*.³⁶

No matter how horrifying Cesare's act in this episode appears to us, it is important not to lose sight of the mechanism through which he achieved in people such an extraordinary effect of the unity of the two contrary affects, namely, satisfaction and awe/stupefaction. Machiavelli's point regarding this episode does not simply consist in that Cesare was cruel, or more cruel than anybody else including Remirro himself, because, if he had been simply cruel, he could never have earned people's friendship. Rather, the point lies in that this cruelty itself was performed in *two successive steps*. First, Cesare sent Messer Remirro to Romagna to rule, with his own cruelty and arbitrariness, over people as well as the nobles who were only interested in despoiling them. And, then, after an order was restored to the region, Cesare himself arrived not to praise the efficient rule that Remirro established there, but, on the contrary, to punish him for it. One might say—and I completely agree—that this is merely a show and a lie. But it is through this deceptive operation that Cesare successfully *substituted* himself for Remirro in front of everyone's eyes, while at the same time founding a civil court, legitimizing the laws he promulgated, and thus producing a *hegemonic dimension of his power*, which cannot simply be accounted for by a practice of mere brutality or “excessive authority.” Such a substitution is what made it possible for Cesare to create in people's mind the counterintuitive affect called “fear without hatred” and to accomplish his uncanny friendship with them. As Machiavelli himself explains, such a cruel act of

³⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 2nd ed., trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 29-30.

the prince must be designed to bring about an effect of putting an end to, or at least reducing, the on-going violence, from which the people are suffering. “I believe,” says Machiavelli, “that [the difference] comes from cruelties badly used or well used. Those can be called well used . . . that are done at a stroke, out of the necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can. Those cruelties are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time than are eliminated.”³⁷

Is not the structure of this episode, however, very close to what Lacan tried to theorize with his formulation of the paternal metaphor, which defines it precisely as a substitution of one signifier for another? As the oppressive master signifier, “Remirro,” was substituted for by another signifier, “Cesare,” the ambivalent effect of love and hatred toward the latter was brought under control, and “an emptiness of the distance taken” between the prince and his people was successfully created. Although he himself does not seem to realize it, Althusser here, I think, is standing very near Lacan, who struggled hard to find a way to subdue the ambivalent effect of love and hatred. What Althusser calls an “empty distance” is easily comparable to the gap of “separation” that Lacan wanted to introduce between the community and its members by means of his idea of the name of the father.³⁸ Althusser writes:

³⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 37-38.

³⁸ My interpretation of the episode of Cesare’s execution of Remirro, therefore, is partly different from Balibar’s. In his essay, “Machiavel Tragique,” Balibar simply lays stress on the extraordinarily cruel and spectacular character of Cesare’s act, and criticizes Althusser for not seeing the dangers involved in such a violent sovereign act, which, according to Balibar, combines in a dangerous way the element of fear and that of *jouissance* (satisfaction). See Balibar, “Machiavel Tragique,” <http://stl.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/seminaires/philosophie/macherey/Macherey20002001/BalibarMachiavel.html> (accessed on

What should the Prince do, in effect, to be a Prince? He should found, constitute and conserve between him and his people, by a subtle play of seesaw that leans on the “thin” people, that is, the poor, in order to contain the “fat,” that is, the rich, *an empty distance: that of the fear-friendship, and not the contagious proximity of hatred or love*. Spinoza will retake, word for word, the terms of this ambivalence. For hatred and love lead . . . the people into their passions and provoke in the Prince the contagion of the passions of the people, which, of course, are lethal. (*ADL*, 500; emphasis added)

Althusser maintains that the production of such an empty distance belongs to the ability of the prince as a “fox.” As is well known, Machiavelli divides the prince’s *virtù* (ability) into two kinds, the human ability and the bestial ability. While the human ability basically designates the prince’s power of moral “virtues” and of the laws that implement them, the bestial ability designates his non-moral or amoral *virtù*, which moves in an entirely different line of reasoning. Yet, according to Althusser, it is less well known that the beast itself in the prince is further divided into two subcategories: a lion and a fox. If the lion represents the prince’s capability to resort to the means of sheer violence, the fox, which is often left out by commentators, represents the prince’s ability to understand situations and dangers, and to manipulate his appearances accordingly. Althusser defines this ability of the fox as the “*bestial, unconscious* intelligence, the intelligence that is more than human because it moves the intelligence of the Prince in the ruse that it *is*” (*ADL*, 500; original emphasis).

Why should the prince be able to deceive himself, his human intelligence itself? It is

October 15, 2011). However, from my point of view, this act, in principle, should not be conceived as what unites the community to the *jouissance* of the big Other, but rather as what institutes an “alliance of the people with the desire” of the prince, as we saw in Lacan’s example of Abraham’s sacrifice. Lacan in his conclusion to *Seminar XI* warns us that the very attempt to avoid the category of sacrifice altogether rather brings about the catastrophic consequence of introducing “the dark God” on the horizon of the politics of the masses. I will later return to the issue of the sovereignty.

because, in order to take a proper distance from people's contagious passions, the prince must first have a void in himself, namely, an empty distance from his own affects. He must not show his inner feelings as well as his plans and intentions. Most importantly, he must not reveal to people his bestial sides themselves (in any case, not as they are). He must hide not only his brutality but his deceptive ability to appear or pretend. The prince must be able to hide his violence not under the guise of the fox but under the guise of *the human*. He does not have to become moral but *must appear as moral*. But this ability to appear as moral does not belong to the human, but to the fox. The prince should hide that he is hiding, he should appear to disappear or disappear to appear, and, for all this, he should first know how to deceive himself, how to distance himself from himself, how to produce thus a void within himself.

Althusser directly links this deceptive operation of the fox to ideology understood in the social sense: “[Machiavelli] says at least this much: that this ability of fox in the Prince is sustained by the social image, that is, the *public image* of the Prince, which I would call the first ideological state apparatus” (*ADL*, 501; original emphasis). However, far from simply claiming that the illusion of such an ideological operation should be revealed to people, Althusser conversely ties it to a positive healing effect produced by, for example, psychoanalytic practices. He argues:

Unfortunately, while saying on this point what Spinoza also says (in *Theologico-Political Treatise*), Machiavelli does not go further. He does not talk about the “nature” of fox in itself. Well, Spinoza, who does not talk about fox, nevertheless talks about its “nature”: it is born from the conversion (by internal displacement, as we saw) of sad passions into joyful passions. And we saw also that this conversion-displacement, which in fact expects Freud, has nothing to do with an illumination or a simple intellectual effort, as the poor theological theoreticians of Enlightenments

wished, but, on the contrary, has everything to do with the ‘*development of movements of body*’—its free agility and disposition of the self [*soi*] in the *conatus*, its reflections and its ‘inventions’—that produce in the *mens* the displacement of sad passions into joyful passions (just as, in Freud, the phantasms, and even the worst kinds, never disappear from the unconscious itself in and by the cure, the passions are simply displaced from dominant position to dominated, subordinated position). The fox is therefore par excellence the *body*, its *liberated ability*. One is here very near the interpretation of Spinoza and Nietzsche by Deleuze. But, for Deleuze, contrary to Freud, this unconscious ability of body is not bound in the configuration of phantasms—dominant and dominated, for example—in the Oedipus that, in my opinion, he mistakenly refuses. Machiavelli clearly saw this who made this third instance an *animal, bestial, therefore unconscious*, instance, which is more intelligent than consciousness itself . . . (ADL, 501-02).

Is it not curious, though, that we do not find any mention of Lacan in this passage?

Is this silence not symptomatic, that is to say, indicative of Althusser’s suppression of the reference to Lacan? The answer, I think, is both positive and negative, since, here where he appears to be nearest Lacan, Althusser is also infinitely diverging from him. We can think of a number of reasons for this divergence. The first thing that attracts our attention is the emphasis that Althusser places on the body. Of course, this “body” is not conceived of in a purely biological sense, since the unconscious and its phantasms that Althusser discusses here are what arise at the border between the body and the mind, and thus are related to the Spinozan notion of “*mens*,” whose Freudian equivalent, as he openly says, would be nothing other than libido. Still, the “movements of body” that Althusser talks about are not simply reducible to the movements of the signifier. What matters to Althusser is rather the possibility of constructing different configurations of phantasms which can serve the body in a more “adequate” manner. Such a problematic of the degree of adequateness of the mind to the body is essential to Spinoza, as he repeatedly says in his *Ethics*, but perhaps not to Lacan, because, for Lacan, the body seems to be what

(dis)appears *uniformly as a void* when it enters the field of the signifier; there are in Lacan no such things as different orders of the signifier that are more adequate (or less adequate) to the body. This is because Lacan does not really allow, in his theory, room for thinking the truly heterogeneous dimension of the body irreducible to the order of the signifier. All bodies, regardless of their singularities, are reducible to the same void.

A more important thing to notice in our context, however, is the fact that Althusser wants to think of the healing effect (whether it is achieved through psychoanalytic treatments or through Machiavellian-Spinozan political practices) not in terms of a founding of a new universal symbolic law but in terms of the conversion-displacement of *force relationships*. Althusser says that there are dominant phantasms and dominated ones, and that the best thing one can wish for is not to put an end to all kinds of phantasms or to remove one kind while holding onto the other, but precisely to introduce a certain seesaw game, by which dominant phantasms and dominated ones can switch their positions in a conjunctural manner. Depending on the case, a healing effect induced in this way can endure for a long time. But inasmuch as it occurs through a seesaw game in which one force cannot completely exclude the other without cancelling the seesaw game itself, there is no terminus, no *telos*, no point at which the healing process is expected to be completed.

We already saw Althusser utilize this image of a seesaw while trying to describe the prince's ability to restrain the greed of the nobles, "the fat," by lending his weight to the side of the poor people, "the thin." The prince's maneuver, however, should never aim at completely vanquishing the nobles, because, as soon as the prince defeats the nobles

altogether, he will not be able to maintain the “empty distance” that he himself requires between him and the people. Crushing the nobles would rather result in a total failure of the seesaw game itself, and hence in a total collapse of his sovereign power as well as the political process of the intended democratization itself. The important thing is to find a way *not to make politics impossible*. The rationale for the necessity of Cesare’s use of an extraordinary measure, namely, the dispatch of Remirro and his subsequent public execution, is deduced in reference to such a logical inference. Althusser says, “‘if’ one continues in this way [which simply preserves the status quo of the present violent situation], ‘then’ nothing will be possible anymore, ‘then’ the people will turn to hatred, which makes all government of men impossible, no matter who governs it” (ADL, 499).

Hence, what Althusser is contemplating with Machiavelli here is the possibility to open up a space of politics in which it becomes imaginable, in the very uncertainty of politics itself, to push forward popular class struggles while reducing the amount of hatred and violence arising from them. Of course, this does not mean that there should be no violent act involved in such struggles. It rather means that a violent act is justifiable only to the extent that it opens up a space in which class politics is not made impossible by generalized hatred. Althusser maintains that such a political space must be conceived according to the Machiavellian aleatory logic of “if” and “then,” and not according to the teleological logic of law. Good laws are still necessary, as Machiavelli himself points out. But, far from becoming an end of conflicts, good laws should become a “function” of class struggles themselves. As we go back to *Machiavelli and Us*, we see Althusser argue:

[L]aws are not *the general form* of political constraint. We discover that there is

another form—fear—and even that laws, far from leading to the disappearance of fear, simply displace it: after the Tarquins, it is laws [e.g., tribunes] that curb the nobles. An element of fear is thus involved in laws, once again excluding the myth of a purely moral city. The truth of laws, in effect, appears as *a function of the conflicts between antagonistic social groups* in the state, sometimes called nobles and people by Machiavelli, sometimes ‘opposing humours,’ and sometimes *classes*. This is the celebrated theory of the two ‘humours’: ‘there is nothing that makes republic so stable and steady as organizing it in such a way that . . . those humours that agitate the republic [can have] a means of release that is instituted by the laws. . . . Machiavelli considers laws in their relationship with the class struggle *from a double angle*. In their *outcome*, they stabilize the balance of forces between classes and then operate (as he puts it) as an ‘intermediary,’ engendering ‘liberty.’ But in their ‘cause,’ they prioritize the people, whose ‘disturbances’ result in the conquest of laws. In his theory of *the class struggle as the origin of the laws that limit it*, Machiavelli adopts the viewpoint of people. (MU, 58-59; emphasis added)

Class struggle, therefore, should *civilize* itself in order to become a politics instead of a war in the end. It should be able to “limit” itself by means of the laws and institutions that it itself conquers: in the Roman republic, this was done, first, through the figure of the prince (like the Tarquins), and, then, through the institution of people’s representatives such as tribunes.³⁹

One may still wonder: Does not this Machiavellian-Althusserian version of politics of civility, despite the aforementioned differences, still come too close to the Lacanian one, in that it underlines the role of the prince as the ultimate bearer of the sovereign power? Is it democratic enough, in other words, to be compatible with the politics of

³⁹ Althusser explains: “Thus, in Rome, for example, ‘after the Tarquins were gone, fear of whom had kept the nobility in check, it was necessary to consider a new institution that would produce the same effect [as] the Tarquins.’ This new institution was the creation of tribunes, who could ‘act as intermediaries between the plebeians and the senate and . . . curb the insolence of the nobles’” (MU, 58). As for the concept of civility originating from Machiavelli’s theory of two humors, see chapitre III of Marie-Gaëlle Nikodimov, *Conflit civil et liberté: La politique machiavéllienne entre histoire et médecine* (Paris: Honoré champion éditeur, 2004), pp. 61-101. Machiavelli’s own expression of “*vivere civile*” appears in Part I, Chapter III of *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, trans. Max Lerner (New York: Random House Inc., 1950). Also see Maurizio Viroli’s account in Viroli, *Machiavelli* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 47 ff.

emancipation that Althusser himself wanted to pursue in his theory of ideology?

Althusser himself asks this question by pointing out that, for Machiavelli, only the prince appears to be the one who is capable of activating a certain conversion-displacement of the economy of phantasms, whereas, for Spinoza, it is said that every individual, at least in principle, is capable of doing so. After all, the *virtù* of the fox is considered to be an ability that only belongs to the prince, and not to the people themselves. But Althusser claims that “this is perhaps an illusion, if one is willing to return to this [Machiavellian] circular causality that makes the Prince inspire in the people the distance with respect to their passions, and to the people the distance with regard to the master-passions, love and hatred, in the Prince [*Mais c’est peut-être une illusion, si on veut bien revenir à cette causalité circulaire qui fait que le Prince inspire au peuple la distance à l’égard de ses passions et au peuple la distance à l’égard des passions-maîtresses, amour et haine, dans le Prince*]” (ADL, 502).⁴⁰

Hence, it is not just the prince who attempts to produce an appropriate distance from the people’s contagious passions; the people themselves, through the figure of the prince, or, more generally, through the figure of their *representatives*, try to distance themselves

⁴⁰ Another question that can be raised for the Machiavellian idea of *virtù* is: does it not privilege the masculine ability of the prince? This is a legitimate question, especially because we are here concerned with the difference between the Lacanian politics and the Machiavellian-Althusserian one. As for this issue, we may refer to Bonnie Honig’s following argument: “The highest overall excellence of Machiavelli’s man of *virtù* is his ability to be like *fortuna*, to be as capricious, unpredictable, and wily as she. True manliness means the capacity to cross-dress, to put on the apparel and wield the accoutrements of the truest (because most false?) woman. *Virtù*, the capacity to beat *fortuna* consistently and well, is the talent for beating her at her own game. The trick is to outwoman *fortuna*, to be a better woman than she. And only a man of *virtù* can do that. The talent of Machiavelli’s man of *virtù* is his capacity to cross uncrossable lines (between male and female, man and nature), his willingness to take risks from which ordinary humans withdraw.” (Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993], p. 16).

from their own passions as well as from the prince's. Perhaps, it is appropriate here to return to Althusser's earlier discussion of the relationship between the masses and the melodrama in "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (Notes on a Materialist Theatre)," and think afresh about his idea of the "dialectic-in-the-wings structure." What is important for Althusser, as we saw, is not the external distance that separates the audience from the theatre itself, but the internal distance, opened up within the theatre, to enlist the audience and move them to develop a critical consciousness with respect to their own ideology. Althusser argues that, in order to create such an internal distance, one must displace the melodramatic or tragic structure to the margins of the theatre, while staging the masses themselves—their empty lives and the conditions of their existence—at the center. But this does not mean that such a dialectical structure of melodrama or tragedy should be removed altogether from the materialist theatre itself. Quite the reverse, this structure is absolutely required of the materialist theatre, even if it ought to be displaced to the margins; in order to engage in a constant movement of criticism within the ideological theatre, the audience must have such a dialectical structure of drama in the wings. And, if such a dialectic-in-the-wings structure is needed for the materialist theatre, can we not say, in a similar manner, that what we can call the *representation-in-the-wings structure* is also needed for the materialist stage of class politics? The true value of political representation lies in its capacity to bring about a *Brechtian estrangement effect* for the masses themselves.⁴¹ Through a political representation, the masses can take a

⁴¹ In his *Violence et civilité*, Balibar came to a similar conclusion: "however I believe today . . . that one can read it differently, by putting accent not on such and such institutional or juridical form, but on the necessity, for the revolution (and even in the middle of the revolutionary process), of a *representative*

proper distance from their own passions and powers oftentimes dangerous to themselves. But Althusser argues that, in order for such an estrangement effect to materialize, the structure of representation must be displaced to the margins of the stage, giving up its central place to the masses themselves. Without the masses organizing themselves in the center as a political force, the representation would turn into a usual liberalist melodrama, which rather destroys the proper distance that the masses ought to take from themselves.

The paths on which Althusser and Lacan walked sometimes converged and other times diverged. While approaching each other, while learning from each other, they in fact never stopped debating with each other. But it is no less clear that one would not have been himself without the other. The possibility of a new dialog between Althusser and Lacan is infinitely open inasmuch as they themselves constitute elements of thought that we must newly combine in singular conjunctures that we ourselves infinitely enter.

moment. That is to say, a moment that permits a collective movement, and particularly a movement of mass, to distantiate itself from itself, or to produce, with regard to its collective identity and the representation that it forms about its ends and means (about its forces) a *Verfremdungseffekt* in the quasi-Brechtian sense: an effect of critical perception resulting from a “mise en scene” or “mise en espace” (*Violence et civilité*, p. 159; original emphasis). Also see the conclusion of Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc, “De la théorie du théâtre à la scène de la théorie : réflexions sur « Le “Piccolo”, Bertolazzi et Brecht » d’Althusser,” in Patrice Maniglier (ed.), *Le Moment philosophique des Années 1960 en France* (Paris: PUF, 2011), pp. 255-72.

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